UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Library respects the copyright and intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection. The Library holds the rights and permissions to put this material online. If you hold an active copyright to this work and would like to have your materials removed from the web please contact the USHMM Library by phone at 202-479-9717, or by email at digital_library@ushmm.org.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2019 with funding from
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc.

https://archive.org/details/myprivatewarhung01wink

MY PRIVATE WAR.

A HUNGARIAN JEW LOOKS BACK.

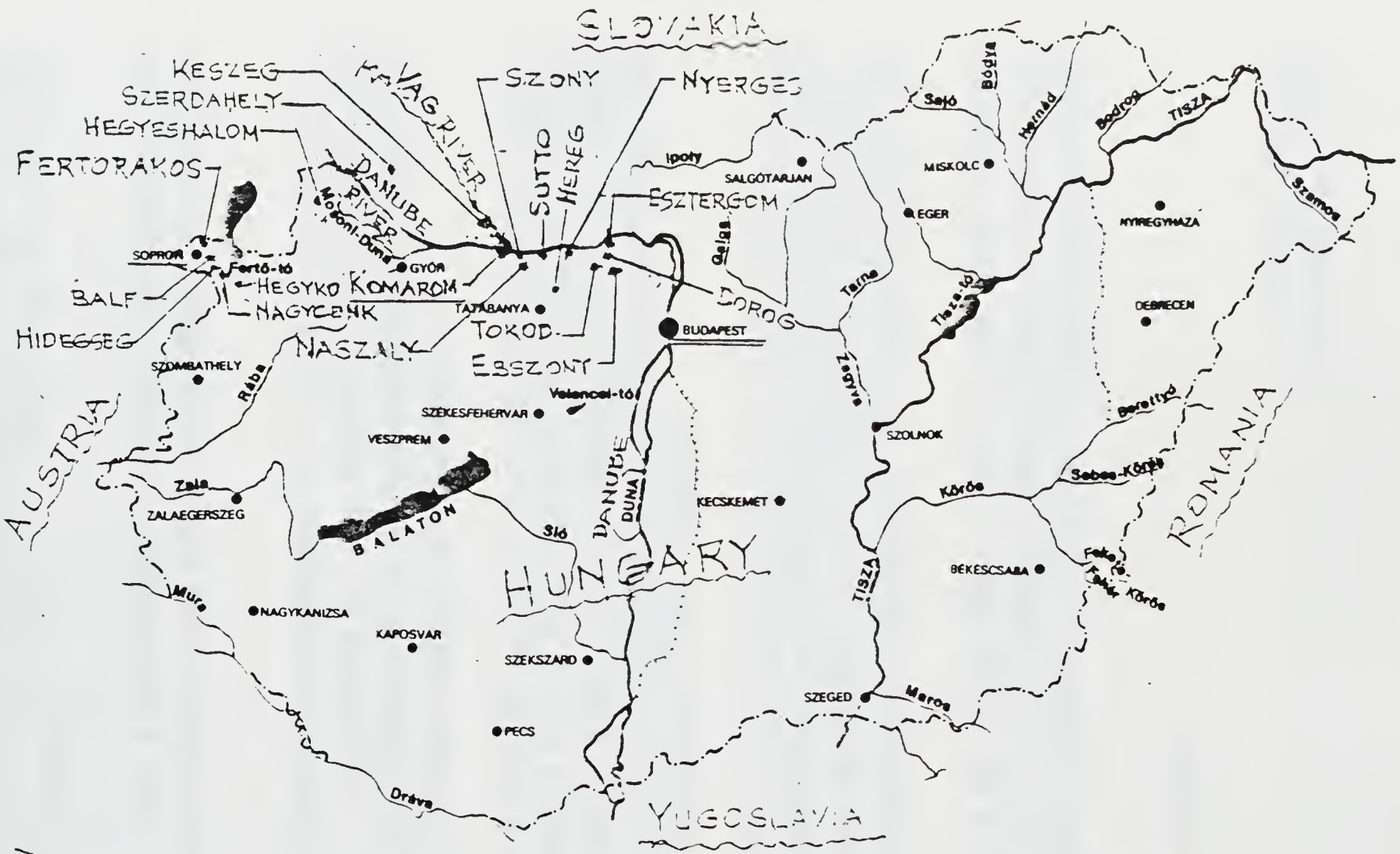
A Personal Account of the Pre-World War II Times and the War-Years in Hungary.

DS
135
1193
W459
2000

TO THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

Rose Winkler

Whose love gave me the strength and determination to change my destiny in Nazi-Controlled Hungary.



Arriving in a country by water, in a rowboat, is like conquering some foreign territory. Traversing the waterways of the country and so to acquaint yourself with the land is an experience guaranteed to stay with you for the rest of your life.

Hungary's natural features offer plenty of opportunities for water tours.

You can travel by boat along the Danube—Europe's second largest river—from Federal Germany or Austria right down to the Black Sea. The Tisza is the country's second largest river; its Hungarian section is close on 600 km long, and it cuts across the Great Plain.

Of the tributaries of the two large drainage rivers, we can choose rivers which really resemble white waters, recommended only to practised canoeists and kayakers; yet, those in search of some easy paddling, drifting at a quiet pace, angling, observing the countryside along the banks—well, people with that sort of demand also have countless opportunities for using Hungary's waterways.

The possibilities for water tours, waterside holidays and camping are continually expanding in Hungary. That is why we recommend and invite our foreign friends as well to visit our smaller or larger rivers and lakes. In Hungary, everybody can find the opportunities to suit his own taste and pursuits. If you need help in organizing and conducting tours, the tourism and water conservancy organizations, the organizations in charge of water tours and the Water Tours Committee of the Hungarian Nature-lovers' Federation will most readily oblige.

FOREWORD

The sole purpose of these recollections is to give a true and complete account of my experiences as a Jewish youth in Hungary. I will try to describe the events to the best of my knowledge, the way they affected us, and me in particular.

In this attempt of mine, I did the utmost to remain objective and to not allow any distortions, omissions, nor any embellishments in telling the story.

This story is not intended for publication in any form, nor for some kind of personal gain. It is mainly for my relatives and friends, who already know some of the details and for Jewish Institutions, in the hope that they might find something useful in this narrative.

And finally, I will not try to appear as somewhat heroic, which I certainly was not, although it was my wish then, as now, to be more active in fighting the Nazis. I just simply responded to various events and situations as they occurred and tried to cope with them to the best of my ability, despite the personal risks involved.

The evil forces were of course beyond my control (or later perhaps beyond any control); and left me only two choices: either to be resigned to my fate, as decided by the Nazis, or try to resist them as much as I could. The first one was contrary to my nature, so I chose the latter one.

This recollection is all about that. Even in the most hopeless situation, I could not give in - not without at least trying to overcome or influence it. If anything, perhaps this is the best characterization of this story.

A Hungarian Jew's story.

OCTOBER, 1992.

Robert Winkler,
Riverdale, New York

PART I
(1933 - 1943)

As an introduction, a Hungarian (Jewish) joke from about 1940:

"Hungary is a strange country (because): It is a Kingdom without a King; it has an Admiral (Horthy) without a sea and has a Ministry of Justice...."

(The punch line: "without Justice" was left unsaid, but of course, everybody understood it.)

I was born in 1924, in Budapest, Hungary. My parents were divorced, and my mother raised me by herself with great difficulty in the midst of the depression. Despite her weak physique, she worked tirelessly 10-12 hours every day, often seven days a week, in her embroidery and underwear repair shop. I think I was her greatest joy in life. She was not only the best mother, but also an exemplary good daughter, sister and friend. She was much liked by other neighbors and acquaintances, as well as by her customers, because of her honesty, diligence and her modest nature.

We could not afford an apartment of our own, so our living quarters was in the rear of the shop, separated by only a curtain. And, of course, it was dark too. This was the place where I studied and grew up. The street was my playground.

The rent was always in arrears, and so was my tuition fee. I remember the humiliating experiences, when my mother had to ask the landlord for more patience, or when I was sent home from school for not paying the installment of my tuition for the gymnasium on time. My mother's wish was that I should be educated, regardless of the cost and sacrifices.

The few toys she could afford were educational and self-teaching. I wore only secondhand clothes. I disliked them and found them embarrassing. Much later when, for some special occasion, we decided

to buy a new suit, it was a family affair because either my grandmother or one of my aunts joined us to help with the selection and bargaining.

This was my milieu and my background in the thirties and early 1940's.

To reciprocate my mother's affection and sacrifices, I was a good (above average) student. I went to public schools and received the same patriotic (if not chauvinistic) education, like everybody else. I was well read, and knew the Hungarian history and literature better than most Hungarians. Even today, after living in the USA for 35 years, my Hungarian grammar and vocabulary, as well as my writing and speaking in correct Hungarian, are well above average. (Perhaps because I am a "perfectionist.")

I was about 17 years old, when I got my first yearly subscription ticket to the National Theatre (Third Balcony). At least half the plays were classics. The other half contemporary - some Hungarian. In other words, I felt and grew up a Hungarian. I felt the same genuine resentment for the injustices inflicted on Hungary by the Peace Treaty, following World War I - as everybody else did, claiming back its lost territories. Of course, this territorial claim made Hungary's neighbors hostile. All this brought about a gradual change in me as the German-inspired (and financed) Nazi ideology was advancing in Hungary. I would mark the year 1938 as the turning point.

Before going into this, I would like to explain the events which made Nazism an acceptable, even fashionable, but not a respectable, trend in Hungary. Without claiming historical accuracy and proof, the following are ***my recollections*** of what I heard, read or experienced.

Following World War I, there was a short-lived Communist Dictatorship in Hungary. This was overthrown by popular demand by Admiral Horthy. (Horthy rose to the rank of Admiral in the Austrian-Hungarian Navy). His triumphant entry to Budapest -riding a white horse, signaled a new chapter in modern Hungarian history.

Before Horthy's arrival, there was "Red Terror", replaced by "White Terror." This latter one was aimed against former Communists and Jews, because of their leading roles in the Communist Dictatorship. (I think Jews were attracted to Communism because of the promise of equality and to end all social injustice.)

In any case, in the early 1920's, there was an open season on Jews before any resemblance of law and order was restored. Army officers banded together (like Pronay, the Britannia Hotel Group, etc.) and roamed the streets, looking for Jews, regardless of what they did or did not do. Several thousand Jews were tortured and killed as a result of these raids. Perhaps as a justification, the virulently anti-Semitic "Awakening Hungarians" movement was organized about the same time.

As far as I know, Horthy was not personally involved in these events. He never spoke publicly, because allegedly he could not speak Hungarian. He grew up in Vienna as a hitherto unknown Navy Officer in the minuscule Austrian-Hungarian Navy. If Horthy would not have been a Protestant, he would have been elected the "King of Hungary", but by law the King had to be a Roman Catholic. Instead of that, he was named "Regent" of Hungary to be addressed as "Highly Dignified." (Hungarians were always title-conscious, perhaps a leftover from the feudal past.)

In any case, Horthy made no attempt to curb the anti-Semitic excesses of the extreme right. Maybe he was unaware of them, or he was powerless, or he just did not care. I think he was a rather mediocre leader, had no political or any other ambitions, and shunned publicity. Whatever the case, I think he let himself be manipulated by his right-wing, pro-German ministers and advisors. Gyula Gombos, then the Premier of Hungary, was one example. He later was the architect of Hungary's joining the Berlin-Rome Axis. These men ultimately led the country to the political and military catastrophe along with Nazi-Germany.

After stabilizing the situation, the only thing he did was create a titled and privileged new class, the "Order of Heroes", clearly for his own support. To be a member of this "order", one had to be decorated for valor during World War I or have been gravely wounded. As far as I

remember, however, no matter whether a Jewish veteran would have qualified, he was most likely excluded from the "Order of Heroes." The "hero" title, with all its privileges, was also inheritable.

It was certainly no democracy, but then the system never claimed that it was democratic. Democracy was a dirty word. The way I saw it, beside the privileged, "Order of Heroes", the regime had two more safeguards to rely on.

One safeguard was the army, whose loyalty was beyond question. As the army expanded, so did their importance. Only in the 1940's did the Hungarian Nazi Party (Arrow-Cross Party) start to make inroads among the ranks of junior officers. But, in general, the army remained loyal to Horthy.

The other safeguard was the institution of the gendarmerie. The gendarmes were in charge of controlling the countryside. Most of them were of peasant stock, hand picked and specially trained elite force. They had a well earned reputation of being brutal and repressive.

When they walked through a village in pairs with sullen, menacing looks and in slow, measured steps, everybody froze. (The cock's tail on their helmets was the symbol of alertness.)

Much later, in 1944, the gendarmes were in charge of rounding up and deporting the Jewish population in the countryside. They excelled in this task. Politically, the government had complete power. The governing party, "The National Unity Party" (NEP) which later became "The Hungarian Life Party" (MEP) and their appointees controlled every important position. A token of left of center opposition was barely tolerated and it was largely symbolic, especially after 1938. The opposition parties, like the Social Democrats, the Democratic Citizens and the Smallholder Party were overwhelmed in the Parliament, by the Government's Party.

After 1938, opposition parties of the fascist right appeared in the parliament, undoubtedly with German backing and financing. Their thinly veiled aim was to overthrow Horthy and the government thus establishing

a Nazi dictatorship. Feeling endangered, naturally the government tried to keep them under control.

I don't recall much about the elections, but I knew from my mother the many obstacles (financial, residential, etc.) she had to overcome for voting openly for the Democratic Citizens Party, as she had to declare her choice. Therefore, I don't think she would have had to go through so many difficulties had she voted for the Government Party. And I don't think the election was really democratic, as we now know it. After these events, no wonder the Parliament itself was in name only.

Without claiming historical accuracy, those above are my impressions and recollections. I grew up in this environment.

To round up the pictures from the early 1920's, the enrollment of Jewish students to universities was limited to 6% by law ("Numerus Clausus"). In reality, the enrollment was closer to 0 because the few Jewish students who were accepted were beaten out of the classrooms by various fraternities of the university. Therefore, those Jewish students who could afford it, went abroad to study; mainly to Austria and to Italy.

It was an unwritten law that no Jew could be employed by the government or by a municipally-owned Company (transportation, utilities, etc.) and, of course, also off-limits for Jews were careers in the army, police and teaching positions. Only the private sector remained open for the Jews. All this took place well before we first heard the name: **Hitler**.

About 70% of the Hungarians were Roman Catholics which was the official state religion. All documents and personal identification cards listed the person's religion too. This was not necessarily discriminatory in principle, but in reality it often was. Much later, at the time of the persecution, these I.D. cards were what the Hungarian Nazis were interested in when rounding up the Jews.

Looking back on my school years, the happiest time was when I was in grade school, from 1930 to 1934. It was peaceful, pleasant, full of warm memories, just the way it was supposed to be.

About 1934 I started to read newspapers and began to realize that something ominous was happening in Germany when Hitler came to power. I also encountered more and more anti-Jewish remarks while I was playing handball or other games with the boys in the neighborhood. I remember after losing one game a boy said, "Hitler is coming, and he will take care of you." I can't recall what I responded to this, but I instinctively felt the threat. That night I told my mother about the incident and I asked her what I should say the next time someone tells me something like that. She suggested that I should say, "If Hitler comes, I will cut off his mustache." We both had a good laugh, but deep down, we knew that this was not the real answer.

In 1934, I enrolled into the gymnasium for the next 8 years. It was a different world without the warmth and attention I used to get in grade school. There were about 40 students in the class, many from the industrial suburbs. There were quite a few ethnic German boys too. There were 6 Jewish students among us, two of whom later converted to Catholicism.

In general, the teachers were good and fair. I couldn't really complain about them with the exception of the Physical Education teacher, who later became openly pro-Nazi.

The geography teacher was rather talkative and often got carried away by local or national subjects. Once, I really wouldn't remember why, but he asked who knew how to address the Cardinal. Many hands were raised including mine. The answers ranged from "His Reverend" to "His Holiness." Only when all answers were exhausted did he give me the opportunity to say, "His Eminence." Then he admonished my classmates. That only a Jewish student knew the correct answer! I was about 12 years old and i really felt good about this. (As I mentioned before, Hungarians used to be very title conscious people.)

In 1938 annexing Austria, Germany became our neighbor and "Big Brother." Before that, learning the German language and literature was already compulsory in the gymnasium, from the lower grades through graduation. But now something new was added to the curriculum: our history teacher (who was otherwise fair and decent) wasn't satisfied with

the official world history textbook and spent one half of each class time dictating his own biased, pro-Nazi version of history (without any reference to the Jewish issue).

Another teacher of ethnic German origin, tried to persuade us that throughout the centuries it was German-speaking Austria that Hungary had problems with. Thus, we shouldn't mistake our friend Germany with Austria.

But the real change came in 1938. Nazism became fashionable everywhere and our school was no exception. I think the main cause of the attraction was its openly anti-Semitic drive. It not only made one automatically superior who wasn't Jewish, but offered the opportunity for everyone to get even for whatever reason - should one have held a grudge against the Jews.

Suddenly, about seven different versions of the Hungarian Nazi Party sprung up and fought each other to be the undisputable leader of the pack. Each had a vicious and virulently anti-Semitic daily or weekly paper, financed, undoubtedly, by German monies.

I think the only thing the Hungarian Nazis knew about Nazi ideology was anti-Semitism, but apparently this was enough to provide the much needed cohesive force to the warring factions. Ultimately the Arrow-Cross Party emerged as the top Nazi Party (Arrow-Cross was the Hungarian version of the swastika).

Naturally most of my schoolmates were echoing the trend, making daily contact with them increasingly difficult. Otherwise, I would have enjoyed the school, since with each passing day I learned something new and my horizon was rapidly expanding.

I believe it was in 1938 that Hungary joined the Berlin-Rome axis as a junior partner. Also Hungary decided they needed rearmament (which was forbidden by the 1920 Peace Treaty). This in return brought relative prosperity to the country. It was even noticeable in my mother's shop. Suddenly new orders for linen for dowries flooded the shop as well as for new lingerie and underwear rather than repairing old ones.

Paying the rent or my tuition (which was already reduced because of my good grades) was no longer a problem. My mother and I could afford some new clothing too without needing the excuse of a special occasion.

I was 14 then and I became eligible to join the public library's adult section. I was looking forward to this day with excitement and anticipation. While waiting in line, I forgot to take off my cap. One of the librarians noticed me and admonished me loudly. "Take off your cap, this is not a synagogue!" I was embarrassed. I turned around, left, and never returned, with or without a cap.

We now had to learn how to get used to such insults, or worse.

This year was also when the first anti-Jewish law (later followed by two more) aimed to limit Jewish presence in the private sector, effectively making the already bare existence for Jews even more difficult. Some Jews were exempt from these restrictions for some special reason. The next anti-Jewish law canceled these exemptions. Such an exemption was the olympic championship at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. There Hungary finished in third place (after the U.S.A. and Germany) winning 10 Gold Medals. A very respectable achievement for a small country. What wasn't mentioned at that time was that out of 10 Gold Medalists, at least 3 were Jewish (Kabos, Keleti and Zombori). So much about recognition and constantly eroding exemptions.

Undoubtedly these measures reflected the growing German influence in a receptive environment. Still the Jewish population (numbering about 600,000 in 1938), was not in physical danger, not until the year 1944. According to a rather sarcastic joke of that time: "It is no shame to be a Jew, it is only unpleasant!"

For reasons not clear to me, Hungary stubbornly refused to bow to German pressure to surrender its Jews, even long after the war broke out. Eichmann, the "Transport Master" was growing impatient, but had to wait until 1944. The Hungarians insisted that they alone wanted to deal with their Jewish subjects, without interference by an outside power. Whether this was a manifestation of true Christian humanity, or Horthy and his associates wanted to use this as a kind of make believe

insurance in case the Axis would lose the war, or perhaps they just wanted to emphasize Hungarian independence from Germany, I really don't know. Perhaps it was a combination of all three. In any case it didn't save the majority of the Hungarian Jewry, but at least it prolonged their lives. Whatever the reason, the facts remain.

The year 1938 was also Czechoslovakia's turn as Hitler's appetite, unopposed, grew bigger. As reward for Hungary's loyalty, Germany (as an "arbitrator") gave a chunk of Slovakia to Hungary. Not the entire Slovakia, as the Hungarians had been hoping, because Hitler had different plans for it. With its sizeable ethnic German minority, he made Slovakia an "independent" puppet state.

Anyhow, the Hungarians were jubilant. There was the proof that it pays to be an ally of Nazi-Germany. Almost everyone was in a state of euphoria.

I greeted the event with mixed feelings. My Hungarian upbringing called for joining to rejoice with my countrymen. At the same time, I felt alienated from them. After all, the anti-Jewish restrictions cast an ever growing shadow on our present and future. It was also sad to lose Czechoslovakia, the most advanced democracy in Central Europe, and a foe of Nazi tyranny.

In Hungarian literature class we were learning oratory: the art of speech making. As a homework assignment, we had to write a rousing speech celebrating the occasion of the return of the former part of Hungary. I still remember the beginning of my speech: "November 2, is the day honoring the memory of the dead ones, but November 2, 1938, was the day of Hungary's resurrection!" The teacher rated my speech as the best in the class and held it as an example. What he didn't know was that I wrote it with my head, but my heart was no longer in it. My alienation was complete.

It didn't take long for the Hungarians of former Czechoslovakia to get disillusioned by the harsh realities of being part of Hungary. First of all, the key administrative positions were filled by Hungarians from the motherland and not by local people. The price of basic commodities, as

well as industrial products, were higher than in industrialized Czechoslovakia. They realized that the benefits of democracy - to which they became used to - did not exist in authoritarian Hungary.

In the fall of 1939, World War II broke out. At the same time, I should have started my fifth year in the gymnasium, but there were obstacles to my enrollment. First, I was required to prove that my ancestors lived in Hungary, at least since 1867. After writing for records to several towns and villages, we could easily prove that all my ancestors lived in Hungary since at least 1838.

Apparently too many Jews could prove this, so now came a new requirement: to prove that my father served in the Austro-Hungarian Army during World War I. This was more difficult, because when my father finally returned after spending 3½ years in a Russian prisoner of war camp, he did not want to have any mementos of the war. Thus he kept no records or documents. He was wounded at the time he was captured (his left arm remained paralyzed) and was taken to a military hospital in Budapest after his release from Russia with typhoid. It was quite a job to keep pressing the hospital 20 years later for the records, but finally I succeeded. My temporary enrollment was accepted as permanent.

I was eagerly looking forward to both old and new subjects in school. We had to choose between 2 new language courses: French or Italian (in addition to German and Latin). 90% of the students chose French. It was interesting to note that in the following year, 1940, the ratio was reversed; apparently due to the popular, but mistaken belief, that France was defeated by the Germans forever. And so the majority of new students opted for Italian.

We encountered a succession of French teachers; they all spent enough time in France to return to Hungary as more enlightened, cultured, even democratic individuals, rather uncommon qualities in those times.

1940 was a very active year. The war was in full swing. Germany was conquering one country after another; the news media, our

neighbors and acquaintances, as well as my schoolmates, were over-joyed and full of admiration for the Germans. While teasing us Jews about the German victories, they assumed (correctly) that the Jews were automatically rooting for the British. The BBC was nick-named as "Vitamin J", meaning Jewish vitamin, but at that time there was little news over the radio to be cheerful about.

There was a curious and strange twist of Hungarian policy towards occupied Poland: the centuries-old Polish-Hungarian friendship. This was based on fighting the common enemies (Turks, Austrians, Russians). Or as I used to say rather sarcastically, they were friends because most of the time they had no common borders.

In 1848-49 thousands of Polish officers and soldiers joined the Hungarian freedom fighters against the Austrian oppressors and their Russian ally. The memory of Polish contribution and solidarity was always cherished and never forgotten. (In contrast, when Kossuth, the leader of the freedom movement, appealed to the Hungarian Jewish communities for help, the Jews responded enthusiastically. Thousands of Jewish volunteers joined the Hungarian Army and, simultaneously, generous financial aid was pouring into the war chest. Of course, these facts were quickly forgotten. Well, this is life!)

While the Hungarian Government as a loyal ally of Germany, applauded the conquest of Poland, there was a dilemma: The Polish refugees, thousands of soldiers of the defunct Polish Army were sheltered quietly by the Hungarians - right at the nose of the Germans. Those who didn't want to stay in Hungary were helped to reach England, or the Near East to join the free Polish Armies. There were exceptions: the Polish-Jewish refugees also in the thousands were considered stateless people since the Germans didn't want them either. After languishing for years in internment camps, when the war with Russia began, all of those in internment camps were deported to newly occupied parts of the Ukraine, where certain death was awaiting them. The Ukrainians were incited that the Jews were coming to take their land away. Therefore the Ukrainians drowned the Jews, one by one, by throwing them into the Dnyester River.

I knew one man who escaped the Ukrainians and miraculously made his way back into Hungary in 1941: my uncle Alex. Since he was born in Czechoslovakia, he was also interned and later deported to the East with the Polish and other unwanted Jewish refugees. His was the first eyewitness account of what was happening there and it left a lasting impact on me. Officially, he was non-existent, a non-person. So for three and one half years after his return he hid in my grandmother's apartment in constant fear of detection. He was then only 30 years old. But this would be another story.

Meanwhile, we tried to live a normal life, pretending that nothing unusual was happening. We ignored the fact that we had become non-citizens in this country of our birth. Gradually we turned more inward. Seldom did we go to a movie or the theatre. No one had a desire to see German or Hungarian propaganda films. Instead on weekends the whole family met in my grandmother's apartment to bolster my uncle's morale and break up the monotony his hiding was causing him. These Sunday afternoon gatherings were the only happy times I remember. We exchanged news played chess or dominos with him. He spent his time learning to cook to help my grandmother and, since he was handy, my mother gave him some of her work. Thus he could feel useful and at the same time earn a little money. It was a tough life for him. When the air raids and bombings started my uncle could not go to the shelter because the Nazi superintendent had previously known him.

My mother's three sisters either lost their jobs or couldn't get one, due to the anti-Jewish restrictions. Therefore my mother shared her work with them in her shop to provide them with some income. That's how my mother was.

From the outside it looked like no one could stop the German steamroller. Almost all of Western Europe was under German occupation.

In 1940 part of Transylvania was regained from Romania, thanks to Hitler's "magnanimity." Again, just like in the case of Slovakia, the part of Transylvania with the largest ethnic German (Saxon) population was not returned to Hungary. Although it was not made another puppet state,

I believe the Germans planned to use it as a future colony. Anyhow, again there was elation for reaping the fruits of the German-Hungarian friendship. Even those who felt some kind of indebtedness towards Germany didn't give much thought to the price of this friendship. Surely the time will come for repaying Germany for its goodwill and generosity towards Hungary. This was to be the period 1941-1943 in Soviet Russia.

For now, we were fed daily triumphant communiques from the German military headquarters about victories in the air, land and sea. Successful reports from the submarine warfare were at the top of the news. The staging of the German radio broadcast was especially effective and it was simultaneously transmitted on Hungarian radio. After playing part of Liszt's "Les Preludes" and several fanfares, and in mounting tension, came a brief and terse announcement about the sinking of a number of allied ships with an account of the combined tonnage sunk. This was a daily routine. Even if we thought the figures were inflated, we knew that there must be some truth in these reports. Our hopes for a quick end of the war were dashed.

It was in the atmosphere that I started the new school year. Approximately one-third of the student population, the loud minority, were openly pro-Nazi. They constantly harassed those of us who were Jewish with anti-Semitic remarks and taunted us with news of German victories. Another third of the boys quietly condoned this while the remaining one-third was the silent minority: intimidated, cautious, indifferent; expressing no opinion whatsoever.

I think this division applied to society too. With relatively few exceptions, the nobility and the gentry, as well as religious and educated Hungarians did not like the Germans and looked upon the Hungarian Nazis as a low-class mob. However, very few dared to opposed them publicly. One who did was Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky who later in 1944 paid for this with his life. Others, like Pal Javor, the popular actor, was jailed in late 1944, charged with being anti-Nazi. I am not sure how, but he escaped execution. There were decent men too, who were willing to risk their lives for their principles but their number and influence was limited.

Going back to my school years, there was an incident in my class which stands out in my memory. In 1940 a new, gentile fellow joined us after having flunked three times in other schools. I was 16 and he was 19, broad shouldered and obviously much stronger than I was. He quickly became one of the worst tormentors of the Jewish boys by constantly making anti-Jewish slurs and remarks. I became his main target. On occasions, when he saw me preparing for the next session, he remarked, "You have to know more, because you are a Jew!" Whether this was true or not, it didn't bother me because I loved to learn. I would just shrug off his remarks. But they had a cumulative effect on me.

Since I wore glasses, I was seated in the first row. Once, while reading the textbook during intermission, I noticed that someone was throwing pieces of crayon with such force that it made a loud noise when it hit the blackboard. I also noticed that these chalk pieces were whizzing near my ears. I looked back and, sure enough, the same fellow was aiming at me with a smirk on his face. I really don't know what got into me but I felt my cup was full. I made a quick resolution. If he hit me, that would be it. I continued reading but did not have long to wait. One of those missiles hit me on the head. It hit me hard.

I jumped onto my feet and went wild. All the previous injustices, insults and torments catapulted me into action. At that moment it no longer mattered that we were in a public school, nor that he was gentile, older and much stronger. My anger made up the difference. I don't know how wild I looked but I ran after him between the benches. He looked at me, both amazed and terrified at the same time. He just had not expected this turn of events.

Finally I caught up with him and threw myself on him, pushing him to the ground. I grabbed his ears and kept banging his head onto the floor until the teacher entered the room. The teacher never noticed the commotion. After this encounter neither he nor any other classmate ever bothered me personally.

Apparently they respected only brute force. Perhaps they thought that I was secretly a kind of "superman." Until today I don't know what

they actually thought because I never had the desire to return for a class reunion. Actually, 1992 was the 50th anniversary of our graduation. I received an invitation. And although this was the first time that I even considered going, I did not.

Anyhow, after this incident this fellow and I never spoke to each other again, which was fine with me. But apparently he didn't forget this experience either. Two years later, while waiting for my turn at the final graduation examination, I met him in the hallway. He whispered a threat, "Don't you ever dare to come to my neighborhood." I just laughed in his face. I was really amused.

On looking back on my schoolmates, they weren't really bad guys individually. But in a pack many of them were transformed. They assumed a mob mentality because they knew they could do things with impunity. This was a great temptation for many of them.

And so we reached the year 1941. I kept going to school without any idea of what I would do after graduation. There was no opportunity for a Jew to continue his studies or get a job. Any job.

As I mentioned before, Hungary was on bad terms with all its neighbors due to its territorial claims against them. Austria ("Ostmark"), a province of Germany, was the only exception. It would have been imprudent to press for the return of "Burgenland" (annexed by the former Austria) thus antagonizing our new "friend" Germany.

Now it was Yugoslavia's turn. First a strange thing happened in Hungarian politics. After years of hostile propaganda and indoctrination, unexpectedly in February Hungary signed a non-aggression and friendship treaty with Yugoslavia. About six weeks later we realized that this was probably a German order to dispel any suspicion of an imminent German attack on Yugoslavia. It was a typical Nazi ploy.

In early April I witnessed the motorized German troops passing through Hungary towards Yugoslavia. I probably stood out from the cheering crowd, because I was not applauding the parade. However the then Premier, Count Teleki and his Foreign Minister, Count Csaky,

looked differently. They were from the old nobility. For them the signature on the treaty meant their word of honor, which could not be manipulated by a Nazi scam.

Count Teleki, a devout Catholic, an internationally known boy scout leader, and a famed geographic scientist found only one solution to save his honor: he took his own life. And, if I remember correctly, Count Csaky did the same thing. The official report blamed this on Teleki's "incurable illness", but I think almost everybody guessed the true cause of both suicides.

Anyhow the Yugoslavs resisted the merciless German onslaught with complete air superiority as long as they could. A few days later, for protecting the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia (a fabricated reason), the Hungarian Army joined the German aggressors. The Hungarians' task was to fight the Yugoslav partisans and their sympathizers (mainly meaning the Jews). The Hungarian gendarmerie specially excelled in this process, executing about 5 or 6,000 Serbs and Jews. (At that time I met a very pretty Jewish girl, a refugee from Novi-sad, and she gave me a firsthand report of the atrocities.) Again loyalty was rewarded: Hungary got a piece of Yugoslavia. The Germans repeated the same scheme as before: Bacska was returned to Hungary, but Banat (which was also claimed by Hungary), with its large ethnic German population was not. I think the German intention was to make Banat a future German colony or outpost. The Croatians had no desire to "return" to Hungary. Instead, they became an "independent" puppet state (like Slovakia). The Croatians were Hitler's most fanatic and vicious followers. They surpassed even the most ardent Nazis with their cruelty against the Serbs, Jews and Gypsies.

(Only in 1943, perhaps to show its good faith towards the Allies, after much wavering, the government wanted to try the commanders of the gendarmes responsible for the bloodbath in Yugoslavia. But the Colonels Grassy and Zoldi of the gendarmerie found a convenient refuge in the German SS. In 1946 they were executed in Yugoslavia for war crimes.)

Meanwhile, summer was approaching and I was looking forward to vacation in the same dusty village where I had vacationed the year before and where I fell in love for the first time. But the county got a new leader, Endre, a vicious Nazi (who was later hanged for war crimes). He arbitrarily forbade the Jews to vacation in "his" county. Though I was disappointed, I got a summer job as a brick carrier at a construction site.

But before I began the summer job, in early 1941, another strange thing happened. Hungary, a staunchly anti-communist country, suddenly made friendly overtures towards Soviet Russia just as it had before with Yugoslavia. (Its opposition to Communism was muted since the German-Soviet Pact of 1939.) First diplomatic ties were established followed by the first Russian industrial exhibit in Hungary. I saw this exhibit and thought it quite boring. Undoubtedly this was again a Nazi plot to convince Stalin that Germany had no intention of attacking Russia. In retrospect, it was a most childish and obvious ploy that should have made everyone suspicious. Yet it worked!

When on June 22, 1941 Germany declared war on Russia, claiming all kinds of violations, it came as a complete surprise to Stalin. Despite Churchill's warnings about the impending German attack. The Germans moved in with lightning speed and it looked like Russia would collapse in a few weeks. Nazi-Germany was about to add another conquered country to its ever growing list.

A few days later Hungary too entered the war against the Russians. Now the time had come to repay Germany for its friendship and generosity towards Hungary both for the past and future. There was just one minor obstacle to overcome: The new friendly relations between Hungary and Soviet Russia. This posed no problem. German planes with Russian markings bombed a few cities in northern Hungary. Thus the reason: "self-defense" was used as justification for Hungary to enter the war. Of course, everybody knew the truth, but that didn't matter. Besides, it was beyond logic that since the retreating Russians' hands were filled with the German invaders, they didn't need to antagonize the Hungarians, Romanians, and others. But no one dared to speak up.

This proved to be a fateful move. Two years later, in 1943, the entire ill-equipped Second Hungarian Army perished at Voronyezsh near the Don riverbend. Much later, Hungary could had been spared from becoming a battlefield between the German and Russian armies, and from being occupied by the Red Army for years to come.

Meanwhile, in the store windows, new signs appeared announcing, "This is an authentic Christian-Hungarian store." This was to dispel any doubt of Jewish ownership. The other increasingly frequent sign was the large letter "V" (stolen from Churchill) sign in the windows indicating the victory of the Axis powers. We had to get used to them just as we had gotten used to filtered fragments of the BBC or the Voice of America news broadcasts in the midst of constant jamming.

Back in school, the pro-Nazi group of my classmates became ecstatic over the latest successes of the German Army. In contrast, we heard almost nothing about the Hungarian Army now in Poland and the Ukraine.

Since 1940 Jews could not serve in the army so they were drafted to labor battalions, assigned to the army as auxiliaries. Naturally, they had no weapons but were under military discipline. Each labor unit had an army officer, commander and eight to ten regular soldiers, all of a higher standing than the Jewish servicemen. Many of these officers and soldiers were sadistic and abusive and mistreated their helpless, ill-equipped Jewish subordinates. Some of these soldiers, while on leave back in Hungary, extorted money from the relatives of the labor servicemen.

One of the tasks of these Jewish forced labor servicemen was the clearing of mine fields. This caused many casualties, along with the shellings, bombings, starvation and the Russian winter. The government still tolerated a resemblance of opposition and their newspapers, like the "Esti Kurir" (read mostly by Jews). In these papers more and more death announcements of Jewish labor servicemen in Russia appeared. Usually the cause of death was given by this phrase: "Our son, _____, died while performing his patriotic duty for his country." Of course this was an

euphemism, because they could not write the truth. After all, their death was not a soldier's death.

There were some new developments in school. In addition to the daily prayer we had to ask God's help to protect our valiant soldiers in a war "forced upon them" and fighting in self-defense in Russia. Also new, in violation of the Peace Treaty, was the weekly compulsory paramilitary training. (The rifle practices proved to be very useful later, when with false papers, I was drafted into the Army.)

A few weeks later the Jewish students were excluded from this training since we were not able to serve in the Army when we reached the draft age. As for the future labor servicemen, it was only proper while our fellow classmates were doing paramilitary exercises, that we Jewish students cleaned the nearby football stadium. The contrast was great between the two groups and my classmates enjoyed it thoroughly.

Finally came the news of another "victory": the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. I'm not sure whether the radio announcer said that the attack came before the Declaration of War or not, but he certainly did not mention the fact that it was a sneak attack on the American fleet.

I think the following day Germany declared war on the U.S.A. and a few days later Hungary followed suit. I don't think Hungary's move bothered America much. The moment I heard the news that America entered the war, I knew for sure that the Axis would lose. However, I was not so sure that we would be around to celebrate.

The ensuing swift Japanese victories, while competing with the Germans, somehow were treated by the newspapers as of secondary importance. Perhaps because it happened in far-away places, but more likely because the Germans wanted to reserve the limelight for themselves rather than be overshadowed by the Japanese. Of course, this is just speculation.

Finally a personal, but very disturbing, event occurred in 1941. On my mother's side we had numerous relatives in Slovakia, but we lost

contact with them after the Germans deported them "somewhere in the East." In the summer of 1941 we received a soiled postcard from Poland which sounded like an S.O.S. Our relatives begged for everyday necessities and for money. We sent a package and a money order. The money order was later returned to us with a note, "Addressee Unknown." This was the last communication with them. They disappeared forever. Putting together what my uncle Alex told us about his miraculous survival and return from the Ukraine, and what I heard from the Yugoslav refugee girl, it became increasingly clear to us what we could expect from the Nazis, whether they were Germans or Hungarians. I never forgot this in the coming years.

This brought to a close the year of 1941. That New Year's evening there wasn't much to celebrate except that we were still home and alive. There was a family gathering which was where we felt best and safe, for the time being.

1942 was the year when I was expected to graduate from the gymnasium with no possibility of continuing my education. My mother and I often discussed what I should do after graduation. The only option left was to either learn a trade or to look for a job, any job, as an unskilled laborer. My mother, of course, was for learning, I was for earning. As it turned out, neither choice was made easy for us.

After several unsuccessful attempts to get a job as a laborer, I gave up and tried to learn a trade as an apprentice. First my father found a small die and toolmaker shop in a faraway industrial suburb of Budapest. The owner was willing to try me out for a two-week period. It was then the custom in smaller shops that apprentices had to do all kinds of work during the first few years and later learn something about the trade itself. This place was no different from the rest. As I recall during this two week period I only once had the opportunity to do something related to the trade. I found out I was neither physically strong enough, nor skillful. Most of the time I did deliveries on bicycle just like to other apprentices had to. The steel alloy dies were very heavy and I needed all my strength for pedaling and keeping my balance on the bike.

The last straw was a rather typical if not humorous event, which led me to the decision not to continue this apprenticeship. One morning they gave me a long order of steel material to get from a supply company in Budapest. I was provided with a bicycle and ropes to tie the steel rods to the bike's frame The distance was about ten miles. After I got the material and tied the steel pieces to the bike, I started pedaling back to the shop. It was extremely difficult. Keeping the balance on the bicycle was too. Finally I just could not go on any longer because the load was so heavy that the air went out of the tires.

I stopped and waited for another bicyclist, hoping that he had a pump to inflate the tires. Finally a fellow came on a tricycle and lent a pump to me. After surveying the steel rods attached to my bicycle, he remarked, "It is inhumane to let you carry so much weight, you must be working for a Jew!" When I told him it was the other way around and I was the Jew, there was a brief and embarrassed silence. Then unexpectedly he said, "Pack everything on top of my tricycle and I will help you to take that stuff to your shop." And he did just that.

After getting richer with these new experiences, I quit my first "job." It took me more than three months to find another one. For months I kept trying to find a job with no results. One of the excuses was that I was "overqualified" for the job because I was a high school gymnasium) graduate. Of course, this was just an excuse. We knew the real reason.

The war situation didn't get any better either. The year 1942 was the year when the Germans made fantastic advances in North Africa--until the Battle at El Alamein.

Until now the word "invasion" had only one meaning: Germany would invade England someday. Without noticing it, the meaning of the word was gradually reversed. The "new" invasion meant that the Allies would invade Europe in the future. Germany claimed it was ready for this with the fortified "Atlantic Wall." Later, in 1944, this was tested.

Back to 1942. In November I finally got a job as a lathe machine operator apprentice in a machine shop in another industrial suburb of Budapest. Actually, an influence peddling gentile customer of ours got

it--for a "present." I was contracted for an 18 month term (instead of 3 years) because of my high school diploma.

The factory was well outside of the city limits and it took me more than one hour to travel each way. For the apprentices, the working hours were much longer than for the regular workers (at least ten hours each day, on Saturdays it was somewhat shorter).

Our duties included everything, from opening the shop, heating, loading finished machines onto trucks, picking up raw material from a foundry, and cleaning the shop at the end of the week. Occasionally we had some work related to the trade. Every morning I left our house at 5 a.m. because I had the keys to open the shop before the other workers came. It was a long and drab routine. My starting pay (10 pengos) was about 1/12 of what a young, skilled worker got. But I really liked the trade and was looking forward to finishing my apprenticeship, take the test and become a fullfledged skilled worker. I was determined to make it The work required some arithmetic and reading simple shop drawings. I really enjoyed making machine parts from raw steel.

There were two younger apprentices, one of them Jewish. Most of the workers were of ethnic German origin, including the manager of the shop. The ethnic Germans were openly pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic. They were unpleasant but they didn't bother me personally, perhaps because of my schooling or because I was about three years older than the other boys. They saw I did not expect any preferential treatment and I was just like the others. However, the other Jewish boy was constantly harassed, abused verbally and even physically. It was really revolting to helplessly watch this abuse. On the other hand, the few Hungarian workers were decent and fair.

Fortunately, the manager liked me. He saw I had the potential to learn fast and to do regular work for little money. I didn't mind. So I spent more and more time at my lathe machine producing. As I made progress, so did my pay rise. It gradually increased and near the end of my term it was raised to 25 pengos (about 1/5 of the regular worker's pay. But that's apprenticeship.

I still had my subscription to the National Theatre but the movies I saw were almost exclusively pre-war French movies. I enjoyed these films immensely. They provided me with a spiritual escape from bitter reality.

Occasionally we listened to Hitler's tirades, thanks to the courtesy of the Hungarian radio. We needed no translation. One of his statements stuck in my mind. "Should Germany lose the war, the Jews won't have reason to rejoice over it." It was like an obsession with him, and we no longer took them as empty threats. Of course, losing the war was something unthinkable for the Germans, so the audience took it as a joke and roared with laughter.

Also in 1942 Miklos Kallay became the new Prime Minister, a member of the nobility and, as a welcome change, he certainly was not pro-German like most of his predecessors. He was a decent man, somewhat like Count Teleki, although Kallay went further. Secretly and very cautiously he tried, with Horthy's approval, to extricate Hungary from the war, and perhaps from the alliance with the Axis powers, before it was too late.

There was something new and ominous. Almost every night there were air raid alarms. The radio became silent. But there were no bombings yet.

In December 1942 came the sad news that my girlfriend's brother died while in the forced labor service, somewhere on the Russian front. We later found out typhoid had broken out in his labor battalion. He was placed, with other diseased Jewish labor servicemen, in a wooden barrack called "hospital." Then some of the military personnel had the idea that the best way to stop the epidemic was to set the "hospital" afire, making sure that no one could escape from it alive. A Protestant Army Chaplain was with my girlfriend's brother during his painful dying moments. The Chaplain sent a postcard to the family, giving them the tragic news and describing where he was buried. He died of burns. He was 24 years old.

In this atmosphere we reached 1943. Now, finally the tide was turning. First Rommel's panzers were stopped at El Alamein, in Egypt, and ultimately were pushed out of North Africa. Then came Stalingrad. I remember hearing Hitler, the "Great Military Strategist," on the radio. He said he didn't order the taking of Stalingrad because of its name, but because of its military importance. Then we heard the news on the BBC that the German troops at Stalingrad were cut off and, along with their commander, General Paulus, surrendered. (General Paulus failed to commit suicide, thus cheating Hitler.)

It took three days for the Germans to digest the loss of the entire Sixth Army and to make it public. This time the staging and orchestration was different from the previous victory announcements. Instead of fanfares, muffled drumbeats preceded the brief and terse communique about the loss of more than 300,000 soldiers of the Sixth Army. This was followed by the announcement of a three-day public mourning period and the vague promise that the lost army would soon be replaced.

In reality, after losing two decisive battles, the Germans never recovered from it. They were slowly (very slowly) going steadily downhill. By now we were "experts" in reading between the lines. We had to learn completely new German military terminology and its true meaning. Words like "porcupine position" meant defensive position; "flexible separation" or "shortening the supply lines" meant retreat from the advancing Russians, etc. These were new expressions regarding the war. Now the only victory left was the total "victory" over the Jewish people, and this the Nazis almost achieved.

Until now we heard nothing about the fate of Polish Jewry. If the Hungarian Jewish leaders knew more, they did a good job keeping the secret from the Jewish population. But it is doubtful that the leaders knew anything about the various death camps in Poland. The Germans were successful in covering their activities in Poland. I read Rudolf Vrba's book, "I Cannot Forgive." In this book Vrba, a Slovak Jew, described how he escaped from Auschwitz and went to Budapest to alert the Jewish leaders about the coming tragedy. He had no proof with him and what he had seen in Auschwitz defied the wildest imagination.

Therefore they simply did not believe him. The already frightened Jewish leaders thought he was just an agent provocateur and thus ordered him out. In doing so, they also threw away the last chance to organize resistance against the Nazis. So everything worked in favor of the Nazi strategy.

In April 1943 a few brief bulletins appeared in the papers from the German Chief of Army saying that armed Jewish "bandits" and other "criminal elements" were attacking German soldiers in Warsaw and that the German Army would take proper measures against these criminals.

This was the only reference to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the last stand of Polish Jewry. Of course, at that time we had not known the terrible truth. I don't even recall that the BBC said anything. More reports came about "mopping up pockets of resistance." And the final communique: "All resistance was broken and order was restored in Warsaw." I think this was the last victory on the "glorious" German Army's long list. There were no more.

The Germans were now on the defensive although it was a slow process. (At least that was how it looked to us.) Anyhow the era of fanfared victory ended. About this time the Russians broke through the front line which had been held by the Hungarians and Romanians (which had been considered by the Russians to be the weakest) at the Don River bend near Voronezsh.

This was a total disaster and it became the graveyard of the Second Hungarian Army. This was the ultimate price Hungary paid for German friendship. Yet there was more to come.

The Russians made no distinctions among the survivors. Regular officers and soldiers, as well as the Jewish forced labor servicemen, all shared the same fate: The Russian prisoner of war camp. With this strange twist, equality was finally restored, but at what price? Many men spent years in captivity and hardship.

Strangely enough, I don't recall any announcement in the news media describing the loss of the army. However, by then we were used

to omissions, distortions and the lack of objective news articles. The only source of the truth came from the British and American radio broadcasts, however heavily jammed. Listening to the radio and spreading "defeatist" news became punishable by law.

It seemed to me that the ethnic German workers in my shop were becoming less loud and less arrogant. But this might have been just my imagination.

We finally reached the fateful year of 1944. I continued the same routine: going to work at 5 a.m. everyday. By now I spent almost the entire day at my machine, doing the work of a skilled laborer, but for a fraction of his pay. I counted the weeks, till mid-May, when my term would be over and, after taking the test, I too would become a regular worker. This meant I would have spent less time in the shop and earned more money. It didn't happen.

PART II
(MARCH, 1944 - NOVEMBER, 1944

I will never forget the Sunday of March 19, 1944. The weather was sunny and balmy. Spring finally arrived. As usual, I went to see a French movie.

The middle of the movie was interrupted by the announcement of an air raid alert and everybody had to leave. This was extremely unusual during daylight hours, but nevertheless everybody left. Outside there was no sign of any air raid alert. On the main boulevard people, wearing their Sunday best, were looking curiously at the traffic. A number of German tanks were parading. On the armored personnel carriers the soldiers were dressed in full battle gear. We were already used to the "friendly" presence of German soldiers in Hungary. They came and went as they pleased, but until now they kept a low profile and never bothered us directly.

This time it looked different. One of the onlookers whispered, "The Germans occupied Hungary." And so it was. Our worst fear became a reality. (If I recall correctly, I heard on the BBC that the only casualty of the occupation was a Hungarian soldier who had been guarding the military airfield of Budaors, near Budapest. The Germans dropped parachutists to secure the airfield. One soldier ran towards a landed parachutist to embrace the German "Kamerad." The German apparently mistook his intentions and shot the poor chap to death. It was only a misunderstanding.)

The reason for the occupation was that the Germans found out, through their Hungarian informers, that Admiral Horthy and Kallay, his Premier, were trying to make peace with the Allies. To prevent this, the Germans formally occupied Hungary. Horthy still remained the nominal head of the country. I couldn't recall any mention of what happened to Kallay. He just disappeared. However, after recently reading Kallay's memoirs, I found out that Kallay found refuge with the Turkish Ambassador.

Eichmann (whose name I learned after the war) and his staff arrived a few days earlier and set up headquarters in a luxury hotel in Buda. When the time came, Eichmann immediately made transportation plans to deport ("resettle") the Jews to Auschwitz. How impatient he must have been waiting for this opportunity to prove his organizing talent and efficiency again.

The Gestapo, too, had arrived in advance with a list of members of the opposition. They also had a list of prominent Jews that were to be arrested. In this effort they were greatly aided by denunciation (allegedly numbering 60,000 during the initial few days of the occupation). The Gestapo never had it so easy.

Looking back, I think the day of the German occupation marked the end of my youth. Soon I had to learn how to pretend, to deceive, to forge, to imitate, to be an actor and, finally, to receive a new identity.

Anyhow, upon returning home on that fateful Sunday, I broke the news to my mother. We had little sleep that night, wondering what our future would be. The immediate problem was whether or not I should go to work. My mother was against it but I insisted on going because I had the keys to open the shop for the other workers.

So Monday morning at 5 a.m. (the usual time) I left for work with mixed feelings. Nothing unusual happened on the way. When the workers arrived however they started to ask me and the other Jewish fellow about our trip. The ethnic Germans sounded rather sarcastic regarding their "concern" for us.

Pretending indifference, I asked them what was so special today? Each of them revealed similar experiences: the streetcar or the local train was stopped at the city limits. Then a German soldier and a Hungarian policeman boarded the train to inspect the passengers' identity cards. (Hungarian I.D. cards indicated the owner's religion. All the forms were handwritten in ink, as was customary then.) The Jewish passengers were taken off the trains and streetcars. (Only after the war did I learn that these Jews were the first to be interned at the Kistarcsa Camp and later dispatched to Auschwitz. The German Nazis had the

absurd idea that these Jews had tried to flee. In fact, there was no place for a Jew in occupied Europe. This never crossed the Germans' robot-like minds.)

Naturally I was very nervous all day wondering how I would get home. When the end of the long day finally came I gave the shop keys to the manager as a precaution. I didn't know whether I would arrive there the next morning. The other Jewish boy and I decided to walk to the city limits and see for ourselves what actually was going on there. Between the city limits and that suburb was a so-called forest with sparsely grown trees and bushes. Undetected from this vantage point, we could observe the procedure at the streetcar stop. We saw a German soldier together with a Hungarian policeman waiting for the next streetcar.

When the streetcar came, both the German and the Hungarian climbed aboard at the rear end. Later they got off at the front end. Only after that could the streetcar leave.

From a safe distance, we watched this routine repeated over and over again. Then we realized that their orders were to inspect the passengers already on the streetcar. They didn't bother the people who were waiting there for the next streetcar. Once we discovered this loophole, we approached the waiting area just moments before the next streetcar was about to arrive, trying to appear calm. When the streetcar arrived, we let the German and Hungarian get on board first. We followed them, but only till the middle of the car. The streetcar started to move after the soldier and policeman disembarked. Naturally, we were both tense and uneasy because we had no idea what would happen at the next stop. But, thankfully, the rest of the trip was uneventful.

When I arrived home my mother was anxiously waiting to hear about my experiences during this first full day of the German occupation. Naturally, she was against my going to work the next morning. Yet my sense of duty was stronger than her objections.

I believed that the incident at the city limits was an isolated one. However, the following morning a gentile friend of mine was waiting for me at my streetcar stop. He warned me not to go to work because there were checkpoints all around Budapest's city limits. The sole purpose was to identify and remove Jewish passengers. I was convinced and returned home.

A few days later Hungary had a new Premier, Dome Sztojay (originally Dimitry Stojakovich), the current ambassador to Germany. (After the war he was tried as a war criminal and sentenced to death by firing squad. His execution was the only one I witnessed. He died in a cowardly manner. Once, at least, justice was served.)

We quickly knew that Sztojay would be an obedient tool in the hands of the Germans and he wouldn't disappoint his masters. Pro-Nazi as it was, the new government didn't include the Arrow-Cross yet, which was a threat to Horthy as well as to the Jews.

It became a daily routine both in the newspapers and on the radio to announce various anti-Jewish measures. One such ruling was that Jews who worked outside of Budapest would require a special permit to travel. I obtained the permit, printed on yellow paper (an obvious hint). Everyday I had to show the permit to a policeman or to a gendarme at the city limits before I would be allowed to continue to either my place of work or home. I always felt uneasy about this because should they tear the permit to pieces, I would become completely helpless. It could have happened, but it didn't (at least not with me).

By now there was an avalanche of restrictions inspired by the Germans. One of them was like the forerunner of future deportation to the "East." Its essence was: "Since Jews are dirty and disease carriers, they shall therefore be separated from the "Aryan" population so the Jews cannot contaminate us." The Jews shall be moved to designated houses, marked with the yellow star of David.

This was also the time when my mother and I discussed with our relatives what future was in store for us (if any). Over and over we recalled the desperate messages of our Slovakian relatives deported to

Poland, as well as my uncle's story about the Ukraine. So my mother decided to pack two suitcases with warm clothing and necessities like soap, toothbrushes, and candles, etc.

What we didn't know was that the German strategy was to force the Jews to move constantly and thus keeping them off balance. In this way their meager possessions would erode together with their morale to resist. Soon there would be no place to go except the Ghetto which was only a temporary stop en route to the death camps. This was the scenario for the Hungarian Jews too, although we couldn't see it so clearly then as we can now.

Interestingly enough, there was one decree which affected the entire population, not just the Jews. It was a traffic rule: the left side traffic had to be changed to the right side in a very short time (one week). The official explanation of this was that the new traffic rule was compatible with the general traffic system throughout Europe. Everybody knew that this change was required for the convenience of the German troops, but nobody said anything in public.

Only the BBC commented on this during the Hungarian broadcast. The commentator was Professor C. Aymler Macartney, who for reasons unknown to me, was infatuated with Hungarian history and language. I can remember his lamenting (in funny accented Hungarian) how a centuries old Hungarian tradition, the left side traffic rule, had to be abolished because of a German order. This order and the one about compulsory darkening of the streets and shading the apartment windows, were the only ones that affected the general population. Every other rule was aimed at the Jews only.

Shortly thereafter our treasured short-wave radio was confiscated. It was our only link to the outside world. The official explanation was to prevent the Jews from spreading "false rumors."

Eichmann and his staff must have worked tirelessly to produce a "transportation" plan in such a short time for the then 800,000 Hungarian Jews. According to their schedule, first the countryside would be cleared of Jews by ghettoing them first, then "resettling" them in the "East" (a

euphemism for Auschwitz). Then the 250,000 Jews of Budapest were to be dealt with.

Apparently the Germans didn't want to openly participate in the deportation of the Jewish population. Perhaps partly because they didn't have the manpower and partly because they wanted to make it look like it was a purely internal Hungarian affair. Thus, instead of direct involvement, the Germans stayed modestly in the background, acting only in an advisory or supervisory capacity. The actual dirty work was left to the Hungarian gendarmerie and their local (often enthusiastic) help.

The gendarmes, true to their reputation, excelled in cruelty and brutality in rounding up the Jews, in ruthless bodily search for valuables and finally squeezing them into the waiting cattle cars without regard to age, physical condition or personal eminence and status. There were no exceptions of any kind. The inhumane treatment of Jews indicated that the gendarmes must have known the fate awaiting them.

Everything went "smoothly" and according to Eichmann's schedule. The deportation started in mid-May of 1944 and by the end of June about 400,000 Jews were transported to the "East" to their death. The countryside had no more Jews with the exception of the Jewish men who served in the labor force. But their families were gone.

It is worth mentioning that "Eichmann & Co." discovered a new reason to transport Jews to their deaths. They found that it was a very profitable business for the Third Reich. I learned about these dealings with the super rich only after the war and they were confirmed by former Premier Kallay's memoirs.

The industrial Baron Weiss and his family owned Hungary's largest steel mill complex. Here they produced everything made of steel from nails to motorcycles. Maybe it was Eichmann who had the brilliant idea of offering the Weiss family safe passage to a neutral country of their choice if they would relinquish their assets to the Reich. The Weiss family had no choice but to agree and sign the transfer documents. The Germans kept their word and the family (with over 40 relatives) was

spirited to Portugal. Probably, Eichmann had hoped that after winning the war, the family would be caught anyway.

Today they live very comfortably in New York and could possible shed some light as to what really happened then. Ironically, the former Hungarian government listed them as war criminals because of the "deal."

After this initial success Eichmann & Co. tried to do the same with Tungsram, the largest electric bulb factory of Hungary. But this time they could not succeed because Lipot Aschner, the chairman and main stockholder was already deported to Auschwitz. Through loudspeakers there he was asked to come forward, but it was too late. He had already been sent to the gas chamber. Without a proper signature there could not be any deal. The Germans were very meticulous about these fine details. Through coercion like this they tried to steal the best Hungarian industries. All this happened right under the nose of the Hungarian Nazis.

Soon the Jews of Budapest would be the next target. But this did not occur as had been planned.

Meanwhile, my mother and I, along with most of our relatives, lived in so-called designated Jewish houses. But my grandmother, her youngest daughter and uncle Alex (who was still in hiding) had to move. This created an enormous problem for him, since he was officially a non-person. He had an idea, which at first seemed like a good one. One of his gentile friends had died prematurely of tuberculosis. Alex made a request to his friend's parents for his papers. They did so at great risk to themselves. I cannot commend them enough for having done this. So Alex, with his new identity, rented a furnished room for himself. Only then he realized that he faced a different problem: like all able-bodied men he was supposed to be in the army. Therefore, he again seldom ventured outside in order to avoid sudden inspection by the military police (a branch of the gendarmerie).

The deadline for moving my grandmother was April 10th. But just before that came the order which I considered then to be the worst anti-

Jewish measure, just barely two weeks after the occupation. Effective April 3rd, under penalty of law, it was ordered that every Jew must wear a 4" x 4" yellow star of David firmly sewn to the garment as a visible warning sign to Christians. This, of course, was not only humiliating, but also provoked the worst elements of Hungarian society. They now felt they had a license to do whatever they wanted to the Jews, and with complete impunity.

Fortunately, there were exceptions. So far, my mother's modest shop was not affected by the anti-Jewish restrictions. But we had to observe the curfew. We could leave the house only from 11 a.m. till 3 p.m. One day a very poor Catholic priest, a regular customer who brought his worn shirts for repair, noticed the yellow star on my mother's dress. He bowed his head to my mother saying, "Madame, wear this with Christ's patience." It was a symbolic gesture, but made us feel a little better.

I was not so lucky. Young thugs of my age were the most dangerous and therefore I left our house only when it was absolutely necessary. Even then I walked quickly and kept close to the buildings for protection. Yet I was spotted by young punks two or three times. They came at me from opposite directions. One punk headed diagonally towards me and bumped his shoulder into mine. Then he started to create a scene by yelling loudly, accusing me, the Jew, of attacking him and, as an added insult, cursing his mother. In all fairness, I must say that they failed in their attempts to arouse the passersby. No one believed them. Thus the unsuccessful thugs left.

The day came when my grandmother had to move to a Jewish house in a back street. Together with my cousin, we helped her carry the necessities for setting up a new household. We made several trips across the main boulevard. During one of the final trips, just before we reached the boulevard, a stranger (a gentile woman), whispered to us something that sounded like, "Turn back quickly!" But we didn't understand what she had meant and continued towards the boulevard.

On the boulevard we saw a crowd of several hundred people gathered at the streetcar stop at Rakoczi Square. We thought perhaps

there had been some sort of accident that excited the crowd. But when they noticed us, the noise grew louder and we then realized what the woman's warning had been. We were in the midst of a political (anti-Jewish) demonstration. We turned around, but it was too late.

As soon as they noticed us, a few thugs from the crowd got behind us. I never saw my attacker's face but when I turned around he hit me with full force on the mouth, breaking my upper front teeth. Another one punched my cousin. We both fell onto the pavement. Their intention was to knock us out so the mob could trample on us or perhaps lynch us. (Afterwards, I found out that it was an organized Nazi demonstration following the revival of the notorious anti-semitic German film "Jud Suss." So we really approached them at the right time.)

Fortunately, neither of us lost consciousness. We both jumped up and ran in different directions with our assailants closely behind us. I literally ran for my life. As the distance grew between me and the mob, the stamina and interest of my pursuers decreased and they finally gave up.

I was bitter and felt helpless. I went to see my dentist after this incident. My broken teeth were very sensitive. A fragment became embedded in my lips and had to surgically removed. The dentist was Jewish and he was literally trembling when I told him what had happened.

Our relatives had next door neighbors, a Hungarian couple, both anti-Nazi, who refused to move from the Jewish house. When I told them about my encounter with the Nazis, the husband told me quite seriously, "I wouldn't have run away. I would have stayed and fought them." To this I answered, equally seriously, "With a sub-machine gun and ample rounds of ammunition I would have been more than happy to stay there."

Before all this happened, and on the day following the compulsory wearing of the yellow star, my mother decided that I should not go to work any more. It was just too risky to commute to the shop and back. I argued, in vain, that I only needed six more weeks to complete my

apprenticeship. She would not budge. Reluctantly I gave in but deep down I agreed with her because I knew too well that even the yellow travel permit was no guarantee for my safe return.

The next day (April 5th) was the first time the Americans bombed German-occupied Budapest. I think their target was the Island of Csepel, where Hungary's largest steel mill and machine fabricating complex was situated. However, they bombed the suburb on the other bank of the Danube River instead, probably by mistake. This was where my shop was. A bomb hit my shop, one man was killed, and several were wounded. My lathe machine was buried ten feet deep in the ground. Despite all of this, I had to go back to help with the salvaging, otherwise they were threatening to cancel the contract.

My mother was very proud that she had had a premonition and didn't let me go to work that day. She was wholly justified.

In early May, 1944, the Hungarian military started to draft Jewish men into the labor service, claiming the army needed them. When they ran out of names, posters appeared, ordering every Jewish male between the ages of 18 to 65 to report at once. This was also the time when ghettoes were being set up in the country as a way station for deporting the Jewish population.

After the war, the organization of former Jewish forced labor servicemen presented a plaque to the then Minister of War, Vilmos Nagybaczoni-Nagy, for his humanitarian efforts in saving Jewish men from deportation to Auschwitz.

If this was true, it probably had Horthy's approval. But it was done much too late and in a clumsy way, rather than organizing and arming the Jews to fight the Nazis with eventual Hungarian participants loyal to Horthy. As far as I know, there was no armed resistance against the Germans in Hungary. In any case, those good intentions didn't reach the large masses of people but they did prove that Horthy and the government knew the fate awaiting the Jews.

On the 16th of May I too was drafted into the labor service and reported to the military command in Vac, about 20 miles north of Budapest. I had mixed feelings about this. The only good thing I saw in this, however naively, was that being under army rules and discipline would also mean some protection against the German and Hungarian (Arrow-Cross) Nazis.

The only visible change besides the army cap was that instead of the Star of David we had to wear a yellow armband. Converts and Christians with some Jewish ancestry wore white armbands. The two groups within the battalion didn't mix. (Of course, at the end, the color of the armband didn't make any difference. We all were Jews in Nazi eyes.)

What impressed me most were those young Jews who returned from the Russian front after enduring years of hardship and constant abuse. They knew each other and were like brothers, ready to share and help each other in any way they could. It was real comradeship with a strong bond. One for all and all for one. There was nothing like this among us, the newcomers, of different ages and backgrounds.

I think at the beginning they didn't know what to do with us. I was assigned to the railroad yard to move piles of lumber. I didn't know whether this work was needed or not, but we had to have a military escort and supervisor to oversee our work.

It was late May. The weather was sunny and hot. While working there I came across several sealed boxcars standing there in the middle of nowhere and filled with Jews from a ghetto. They were among the first to be deported to the "East." (Eichmann, the transport master, didn't waste much time liquidating the ghettoes.)

Inside the overcrowded wagons must have been even hotter. These Jews were begging only for water but there was nothing I could do to help them. Partly because I had no bottle or pot with me and partly because I was afraid to move closer to them. (Six months later I was in the same situation and had a constant thirst. Only then did I really understand what it felt like.)

After work we returned to our base, a hastily evacuated elementary school's classroom. The bed was a thin layer of straw placed on the floor. The place was so crowded that one could sleep only on his side and never on his back. We were treated like prisoners (or slaves), and were not permitted to leave the area without military escort.

We knew those were only temporary arrangements. There were all kinds of rumors about assignments to various labor camps. The most frequently mentioned possibility was the dreaded copper mines of Bor in Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia. I, too, was afraid of this and the only comforting thought was that some day these mines might be overrun by Tito's partisans and I would have a chance to join them in fighting the Nazis.

From the battalion clerks we knew the deadline when the selected labor battalions would be shipped to Bor. As the day was approaching, so was the excitement mounting. In the middle of the night before the shipment's day, a sergeant came with a list of various construction tradesmen wanted: welders, mechanics, carpenters, etc. Those who stepped forward thought these skills would be needed in Hungary and the rest of us would be sent to Yugoslavia. They were wrong. It was the other way around.

I slept through the sergeant's visit and my neighbors didn't wake me up because they knew that my skill was not on the wanted list.

Soon afterward, the remaining battalions were put on a freight train and shipped to Magyarovar, near the German (Austrian) border. This time we were quartered in an old, unused gunpowder factory, waiting to be sent on assignment to Budapest (hopefully).

Again in mounting excitement, the clerk announced that 100 steel workers were required and he was going to make a list of them. Everybody thought that this was it and those on the list would be sent to Budapest. This time they were right. There was a big rush and commotion around the clerk. I didn't push too hard because I was confident that I had the qualifications required and pushing would have been contrary to my nature. I was wrong! I became the 102nd on the

list when only 100 were needed. So I learned my first lesson of army rule: the numbers are "sacred" and when they want 100 men it cannot be more or less.

I was bitterly disappointed by the turn of events but the waiting was over and the remaining steel workers were assigned to the local Kuhne agricultural machine factory which was converted to war production. There I got my first taste of slave labor.

Our makeshift sleeping quarters was an empty storage depot with straw placed on the floor. We could never leave the factory. The food was meager and miserable, the work was hard and, of course, without pay.

I was assigned to a lathe machine, making large bolts according to blueprints. Others made cannon shells, etc. After the eight hour shift, I was relieved by my gentile counterpart. But for me the workday wasn't over yet. After finishing my eight hour shift, I had to sort and carry scrap metal to the steelyard for four more hours. Even the regular work was hard. The production expectation was so high that I couldn't stop for a moment. And there was a constant threat over our heads: those who did not meet their production quota would be transferred to the foundry, a hot, gaseous, dusty place.

My work area was dark and inadequately lit, causing eyestrain. I felt I would not be able to go on like this much longer and I didn't want to either. I started to think about how I could get out of this miserable place. After analyzing my situation, I came to the conclusion that I had to grab the first opportunity to change this so-called life of mine. I had every reason to do so. I realized that unless I changed soon, I would have to stay here until the end of the war (if I lasted that long). Then there was the real possibility of allied bombing raids and the ever ominous proximity of the German (Austrian) border.

One day I became so disgusted with my hopeless situation that I decided to report sick, claiming some unverifiable illness like dizziness. This way at lest I got a day off to rest, just lying on the straw. Around noontime, and to my greatest disappointment, the sergeant came and

ordered the few sick ones out. He took us to the assembly place where the other Jews were already waiting. Then our commander, a cocky lieutenant, gave a short, sarcastic speech. He received a petition from the older slave-workers assigned to the foundry who asked for a transfer. This was completely new to me and I wondered what was going to happen.

He ordered those who signed the petition to step forward. He told them, teasingly, "You couldn't take the work in the foundry so you will be transferred to a farm, where even harder work is awaiting you." Then he added that the number of Jews to be assigned to the farm shall be the same as the number of signatures on the petition. Immediately it occurred to me that only numbers count, regardless of the people. So this was my opportunity to change course, even in a small and limited way.

I had to think it over fast, before I made my move. The hard farm work, the long hours didn't bother me at all. On the other had, it was only early in June and I would be working in bright, sunny daylight in country fresh air. The food too will probably be better and more plentiful than in the factory. And since it was seasonal work, perhaps I would have a second chance to be transferred to Budapest. Everything was in favor of the change. So be it. I decided at once.

Next, I had to find a trading partner, someone who signed the petition. They were in a separate group. Randomly I asked one of them if he had changed his mind and preferred to stay. When his answer was yes, we struck a deal. He would stay and I would take his place on the farm.

After these preliminaries were settled, I reported to the commander in perfect military manner, that I would like to volunteer to go to the farm. I knew he couldn't care less and he said so, as long as the numbers didn't change. But I had to have his approval, just in case. I was jubilant that I could change course, for better or worse. This was my first lesson on how to maneuver in the military and I felt I passed the test successfully, however modest it was in reality.

While I was still savoring the taste of my "success", I didn't forget that I had two other friends there. They were both steel workers from my neighborhood: Robert Pongracz and Joe Urbach. I told them all the reasons to join me. Robert followed me but was wavering. Joe kept telling him it would be crazy to change since in the factory he could work in his trade. I couldn't convince Robert to make the right choice. He returned to the group of factory workers. None of us knew what the future would hold, but with their inaction they sealed their fate.

(Only after the war was over did I find out that my friends languished in the factory till February 1945. Then one day a detachment of Hungarian Nazis (Arrow-Cross) came. They assembled the young Jews in the factory and took them away. We may never know what their original intention was but after a three day march the Arrow-Cross men massacred all at Lebeny, near the border. Later the Budapest Jewish community had the bodies exhumed and reburied in the Jewish cemetery.)

The farm we were taken to was actually just a small part of a huge estate that straddled the Austrian-Hungarian border. It belonged to the Archduke Albrecht, a living relic from the Empire. He was one of the super rich in Hungary but he paid such low wages that the estate suffered from a chronic shortage of labor. In order to overcome this problem he needed and got free slave labor for supplementing the regular laborers on the pretext that we would be working on his experimental rubber plantation. The latex was obtained from the root of the plant, in the form of elastic liquid. These plants however were constantly amidst overgrown weeds. Our job was, at the beginning, to weed out any undesirable plants. It was tedious, backbreaking work.

It was the beginning of summer and so far everything was just as I had expected. The food was fairly good. We were given one litre of milk every morning. The Jewish leaders of our group saw to it that the surplus milk be distributed among the youngest ones, of which I was one. There was also plenty of fresh country bread. We even had meat occasionally. Actually, this was because the regular laborers were so angry about their low pay that they let their anger out on the poor

animals. Whenever we saw an ox staggering, we knew soon we would be eating meat.

There even was a physician in our battalion (102/213) and he made certain that personal hygiene was maintained. No lice was ever found in our group. We slept in an empty stable, but at least the straw was fresh.

Besides verbal abuse and constant pushing for more work, the supervisors didn't bother us much.

There was a handsome Jewish farm boy among us and he fell in love with a beautiful peasant girl. After the war was over I learned that the girl's parents had hidden him. The couple got married and still live there.

It was probably through this connection that the news of the Allies' landing in Normandy and the assassination attempt on Hitler's life spread like fire among us. Our hopes ran high. But they fell again when we saw that Germany didn't collapse.

There was a strange character among us. He was an ethnic German whose name was Weisz. In addition to this bad luck, he was also a Jehovah's Witness. They classified him as a Jew. He was taciturn, and a loner who stayed by himself much of the time. He had a profound faith and made no attempt to change his destiny. He was honest, hardworking and stacked hay like no one else could. He probably perished as a Jew.

Our commander was a middle-aged sergeant, a loudmouthed ethnic German who wasn't a bad guy. His frequent outbursts were probably just for show. He was only interested in having plenty of hard liquor and cigarettes. He was seemingly a good candidate to bribe. The few soldiers assigned to him didn't bother us either. It seemed as if everybody was happy with this arrangement.

The end of June was the traditional harvest time. Since wheat was the main product of the estate, the thrashing lasted for two months.

Suddenly we were shifted from the rubber plantation to various other tasks like collecting hay, cutting fodder, feeding calves (150 head) and changing their straw. When trashing started our work hours were increased from 10 to 12 hours a day. For these extra two hours we were given token pay, enough to buy a little fruit to supplement our food. One day the Archduke paid a lightning speed visit on a horse drawn carriage and after that the work hours were increased to 12 hours a day. That meant the end of the extra pay for us.

I really enjoyed the work on the farm and nature itself. I felt my muscles were growing and this gave me the confidence and satisfaction that I could cope with any kind of work. So the trashing, hard and long as it was, was no problem.

There was something new in our lives; the daily visit of the American planes. They came from several directions and made our area the rendezvous point. After that they flew on to the target of the bombing mission. Hundreds of "Flying Fortresses" were high over our heads, protected by circling fighter planes. It was an awesome sight. They were fully in control of the sky. (Deep down I envied those pilots.) No German planes dared to challenge them. But we did see some dogfights when some of the returning planes developed mechanical trouble or were hit by anti-aircraft fire. Usually they were left behind and became easy prey for the Germans. Naturally we could show no emotion. I saw pilots bailing out from their downed planes and later we heard that the local gendarmes had to protect them from being lynched.

Meanwhile I still could correspond with my mother and occasionally received packages from her. But the news was disquieting. Large numbers of gendarmes appeared Budapest where previously they were rarely seen. By now they were experts in deporting the Jews and their ominous presence could have been the forerunner of the liquidation of the Jews of Budapest.

It was about this time when our commander read an official ruling declaring that Jewish forced labor servicemen should receive "prisoner of war" treatment and status in our own country! When I heard this I remarked to my fellow servicemen that this would be fine with me

because according to the international (Geneva) convention our lives should be protected. However, there seemed to be no guarantee of that.

In August 1944 there was a noticeable change in the official attitude, undoubtedly because of the fast approaching Red Army. First of all Horthy replaced Sztojay, the German's lackey. The new Premier, Geza Lakatos, was hitherto unknown, at least to me. He seemed to be a moderate towards the remaining Hungarian Jews. One of his orders was to extend the curfew hours for the Jews. Also, to celebrate the coming high holidays the Jews were permitted to spend all day in synagogue. That was really something!

The front page of the newspapers contained the interview with the visiting Finnish Prime Minister. In this interview he stressed not only the common origin and friendship between the two nations, but, rather pointedly, he also emphasized that despite its alliance with Germany, Finland was a democracy and had no Jewish problem whatsoever.

And last, but not least, the gendarmes disappeared from the streets of Budapest. Visible evidence of changing times. It was a real relief for the Jews.

The news that Romania's pro-Nazi dictator, General Antonescu, booted the German Army came like a bombshell. Obviously the Germans could ill afford a new front so they left Romania peacefully. Now the questions was, who would be next? Hungary? Perhaps.

Meanwhile, on the farm nothing had changed. But I was keenly aware that by late fall the work on the farm would come to an end. Whatever my next assignment would be, I wanted to take no chances. I wanted badly to be near my mother and in Budapest.

Our sister battalion (102/212) was in Budapest. I was wondering how I could get there. Instinctively I felt our sergeant was holding the key to this. So I asked my mother to send me some money, one or two bottles of brandy and cigarettes. When I received these items, I pondered my next move. I had never bribed anybody in my life. I

discussed this with an older comrade of mine who was like a father to me.

After rehearsing what I would say a few times, and armed with the goods, I went to the sergeant's quarters. I was embarrassed, but he wasn't. While I placed everything on the table, I told him that I was "sick" (again) and would like to have a medical examination in Budapest (where else?). Emboldened by his stony silence, as an afterthought I added that I would also like to use this occasion to be transferred to Budapest. His answer, after glancing at my "presents" was brief, but to my liking. He said in about two weeks he was going to escort a group of other "sick" labor servicemen to Budapest for a few days and I would be included in this group. Of course, as long as he was with the group, we would be protected. But after he left, we would be on our own. This didn't scare me. As far as my remaining in Budapest, he had no objection as long as I could find someone from the sister battalion who would be willing to trade places with me. (By now I knew that the numbers cannot be changed in the army. That's all that counts.)

And so it was. Sadly I parted from my closest friend, whom I would never see again. Together with the group and of course with our "escort" we left for Budapest.

My mother's joy upon seeing me was overshadowed by an allied carpet bombing raid. She had previously moved to her sister's apartment, not too far from the Eastern Railroad Terminal. My mother had not seen me for three and one half months but she couldn't concentrate on my stories. She was praying. While we were in the shelter we could feel the entire five story building being lifted up and floating in the air. It was such an eerie feeling.

Afterwards, I spent all my time trying to find someone from our sister unit who did not want to stay in Budapest. It wasn't easy because everybody believed that a big city offers relative safety against the German and Hungarian Nazis. I found a fellow Jew from another city who agreed to my plan. His family had already been deported and he had nobody in Budapest. I don't know what happened to him and can only hope that he survived after the war, like others I met from this

group. But anything could happen, even in Budapest, as we later found out.

I felt great. I could change my course, for better or for worse. Considering the situation, I couldn't have asked for more.

I got adjusted quickly to my new unit. We were quartered in an old depot of the Budapest Gasworks at the edge of the city's 9th district. In order to report to work we had to take the tramway to the main gas factory in Obuda at the other end of the city. Of course, we also had to have a military escort which was befitting the "prisoners of war." We had to shovel coal or ax an old concrete wall to pieces. The hard work didn't bother me. I rather enjoyed feeling how strong I was. Late in the evening we returned to our base and were "off duty" till the morning roll call at 6 a.m. We were not guarded but the place was fenced in with wooden planks. One of the old timers mentioned to me that there was a loose plank and some of the Jews used this opening to spend the night with their families or relatives in Budapest.

This gave me the idea and opportunity to visit my mother every night. Looking back, it was really crazy to take such chances, just to be with my mother for a few hours. The trip took about one hour each way. The streetcar had to pass the Eastern Railroad Terminal which was in the most heavily inspected section of the city. But I was young and perhaps overconfident and ignored the dangers.

So it became my daily routine to leave the unit at nightfall and return before the 6 a.m. roll call. During the entire trip I was on the lookout for any suspicious sign and was ready to jump off the streetcar if necessary. But I never encountered anything particularly dangerous. Apparently the police and the Arrow-Cross suspended their activities at nightfall. After all, they too were human and needed some rest. Rounding up Jews and searching for army deserters during the day was exhausting work.

After a while my mother told me that her brother-in-law was grumbling lately that he could not sleep because I had to get up at 4 a.m. (They couldn't leave the "Jewish house" before 11 a.m.) It was

obvious that he was jealous because his two sons were far away. I ignored this and continued my nightly visits.

I don't recall making any new friends in this unit, perhaps because I was away half the time. Most of the men in the unit were drafted because of the German occupation. A few of them had spent years of hardship on the Russian front. Here, too, I noticed that converted Jews or those who were part Christian stuck together and tried to separate themselves from the rest. They did so in the false hope that this would eventually save them.

It was already October, 1944. The Russian Army already entered the Eastern part of Hungary. Whatever we had heard about their atrocities we discounted as Nazi propaganda. Unfortunately, there was a lot of truth in it.

Sunday, October 15, 1944. There was great excitement in my unit. Someone had heard a reading of Admiral Horthy's proclamation on the radio (he himself allegedly could not speak Hungarian). The proclamation announced that he had already sent emissaries to the Russian Army to negotiate an armistice, and all hostilities must cease at once.

He denounced the Germans for all the hardships and grievances caused in Hungary and for misleading the Hungarian government regarding the fate of Jews. The Germans stated that they had wanted the Jews as a source of labor (all of them, the children, the sick and the elderly?) and that they would be well treated. Instead of that, they were murdered in the death camps. The Germans broke their own promises. Finally he asked the German Army to withdraw peacefully from Hungary.

The poor Admiral must have been utterly naive, or wanted to appear so. Every policeman, and especially the gendarmes, knew the fate awaiting the Jews when they liquidated the ghettoes in the country. They not only brutalized and tortured their helpless victims, but "searched" them for hidden valuables. As a last resort, they often tried to appeal to the Jew's patriotic feelings by saying, "Won't you rather give me your valuables, instead of the greycoats?" (A cautious reference to

the Germans.) As an added incentive they would say, "Where you are going, you won't need these things."

Equally naive was the assumption that the German army would leave Hungary voluntarily as they had done in Romania. But by this time the Germans had invested too much in Hungary and they probably thought they had lots of followers they could count on.

Of course we Jews were jubilant, thinking that the time of fear and persecution was over. For the first time, in bright daylight, I went to see my mother to share the good news. The proclamation was repeated perhaps two more times and we were glued to the radio, waiting for new developments.

Then suddenly the radio broadcaster interrupted their programming for another important announcement. It said, "Horthy has resigned and the Hungarian National Socialist Party (the Arrow-Cross) is forming a new government. Meanwhile the cease fire order is void." It is impossible to describe the affect this announcement had on us. Our extremely joyous mood was changed to anxiety and despair, all in a few short hours.

Despite the fact that the radio was the main form of mass communication, the building which housed the radio station was just lightly guarded. It was Horthy and his advisors' blunder to not secure the radio. The Germans wasted no time, having realized that the radio was the key to this situation. Immediately they armed their Hungarian Nazi cohorts and stormed the radio building, overpowering the few soldiers guarding it. In this simple way they effectively reversed the situation. Before taking him into "protective custody" somewhere in Germany, Horthy's last official act was to name as a new head of state, Ferenc Szalasi, the founder of the Arrow-Cross party.

In a country where there was no armed resistance movement, a negotiated armistice would have been the last change to avoid the total destruction of the land. This last chance was botched--and thus missed. And for us--the remaining Hungarian Jews--this meant the beginning of the reign of terror.

As for me, I had no other choice but to return to my unit with a heavy heart. I found my comrades in an agitated state of mind. They discussed the various possibilities and rumors, none of them too promising. They even organized a pitiful night watch system just in case the Arrow-Cross was trying to do something. But nothing happened.

Our commander, a lieutenant in the army reserve and a decent man, unexpectedly called us together. He told us that he took an oath of loyalty to Horthy and thus did not recognize Szalasi and his gang. He further told us that he himself together with a few soldiers (some of them probably with Arrow-Cross leanings) was powerless. He could not possibly guarantee our safety against the Arrow-Cross. Therefore he openly advised us to disappear for a while, leaving our temporary address with him. When the situation became clearer and somewhat normal, he would then send for us and his soldiers would escort us back to the service. He was one of the few decent human beings I had come across during this time and I'm truly sorry I don't remember his name. He deserves recognition. We listened to him in astonishment and did exactly what he told us.

I took my necessities and headed to my mother's shop. There was a cellar underneath. The entrance door was in the floor in the rear of the shop, where our living quarters had once been. I knew my mother's trusted gentile employee would be in the shop and would help me get through, in spite of the personal risk.

But first I walked to the streetcar terminal near the city limits. Naturally I was aware of the danger surrounding me during this journey. There were many excited people yelling something but I dared not try to find out what it was all about. I knew it was not a friendly crowd because amazingly, as far as I could see, everybody was wearing the Arrow-Cross uniform or at least the armband. I never realized that they had so many followers and sympathizers. (Of course, I didn't forget to remove my yellow armband.)

I had been in the cellar only a few days when I received a message from our commander that a soldier was coming to pick me up. Naturally, I couldn't wait for the soldier in the cellar, nor did I want to be

seen in the front of the building. I grew up there and everybody knew me. This was not the time to find out who was who, friend or foe. I opted, reluctantly, to wait in the hallway of the building's entrance. There was just no other way, however unpleasant it was due to the constant coming and going of the tenants.

The superintendent of the house came and very politely asked me what I was doing there? Equally politely, I explained that I was waiting for a soldier to escort me back to my unit. He then asked me if I had a permit to be away from my unit. As a last resort, I had an expired one--courtesy of the unit's clerk. He saw that it was already expired and asked for another one. Since I couldn't produce a valid permit, he asked me to leave so he wouldn't get into trouble.

Reluctantly, I stepped outside but went back into the hallway after he left. Then he came back to check and I again went outside. This process was repeated maybe four or five times. Now alternately I had to look for the super as well as for the soldier. Even at the time this episode was quite funny, but I didn't feel like laughing. Finally the soldier came and rescued me.

I believe everybody returned to the unit's base. It looked like things were returning to "normal" and the Arrow-Cross regime was not much different from the previous, half-Nazi regime. However, there was something new. The appearance of mostly young Arrow-Cross thugs carrying rifles and hand grenades. Their presence was menacing enough but as the Russians advanced towards Budapest they really went wild.

Another new thing was, at least for me, the emergence of foreign protective "passports" issued by neutral countries to save the remnants of the Hungarian Jewry. The Szalasi government badly wanted international recognition and those passports were the price for this. Those who applied for these "passports" did so secretly until they got one. Then they proudly displayed them to the envy of those who were not as lucky or smart to do so.

Only after the war did I hear the name of Wallenberg and that he was the originator of this lifesaving instrument (for which, unjustly, he paid such a high price).

Now almost daily I noticed an announcement in the newspaper that Jews, holders of such protective "passports" were to be considered foreign citizens and as such they would be reassigned to special labor battalions. They could also go out without escorts and without armbands. The announcement to respect these "passports" was made to the members of the police, gendarmerie and the Arrow-Cross party. It sounded too good to be true but reality was something else. We had heard stories that the police, especially the Arrow-Cross, just tore the "passports" to pieces after they inspected them. Nevertheless a "passport" offered a slim hope, like a piece of straw to save a drowning man. So I decided to get one for my mother and for myself.

The Swiss "passport" was the easiest to get. One had to stand in line at the Swiss Consulate in Vadasz Street. This also became the favorite Jew hunting ground for the Arrow-Cross. Once someone survived this, and the daily "passport" quota wasn't used up, he'd get a blank form in which the individual's name had to be typed. One of my aunts fell victim to such Arrow-Cross raid at the Swiss Consulate in November 1944. She was herded on foot to the German (Austrian) border to dig trenches in defense of the Third Reich. She ended up in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany and died there.

So we became "foreign" citizens in our own country. It was also stamped in my labor service I.D. book that I would be assigned to the "foreign citizens" battalion. Armed with these papers, and meanwhile still with my old unit, I resumed my daily visits to my mother. This was an even more crazy thing to do than before because the Arrow-Cross was unpredictable.

As soon as I received them, I showed my mother's sister and her husband my new documents. He had been an early and ardent supporter of Horthy, even before he came to power. In recognition of his merits, he was allowed to keep his rank as lieutenant of the reserve and was entitled to wear his uniform and sword. For a while he was

exempted from anti-Jewish restrictions, so he was very patriotic. Gradually his exemptions eroded and at the end he was just another Jew. Despite the fact that everything he believed in was crumbling, he refused to obtain a foreign passport because he didn't want to lose his Hungarian citizenship. I just shrugged at this. Clearly the man was out of touch with reality. He still complained that I was disturbing his sleep because I got up so early. I disregarded him until something else put an end to my nightly visits.

PART III
NOVEMBER 1944 - APRIL 1945

It was about 5 a.m. on an early November morning when the superintendent sounded the air-raid alarm in the house. He announced that shortly there would be an inspection of identification documents.

Everybody, my mother, her sister, and brother-in-law turned pale. I felt my face redden from extreme nervousness. Somehow it never occurred to me that something like this could happen. My mother's very patriotic brother-in-law almost collapsed. Then, nearly in tears, he lectured me about my disregard for the law which would bring mortal danger to everyone around me.

As calmly as I could I retorted that there was no more law and order in this country and everybody made his own law. I tried to assure him that I would take full responsibility for my actions and would state that no one knew that I illegally left my unit.

It seemed like an eternity when the doorbell finally rang. I think my mother's sister opened the door. A young man of my age entered. I don't recall whether he was armed or not, but it struck me that he didn't seem like a typical Arrow-Cross thug. Obviously he was an educated fellow and his polite manners indicated that he was probably middle class. Unlike his fellow Arrow-Cross counterparts, he didn't appear to enjoy his role. Perhaps he was a misguided idealist and how he got mixed up with the Arrow-Cross I will never know.

Anyhow, he looked around and since I was the only young man in the apartment, he focused exclusively on me. I had already sorted out my papers, starting with the one that was recently stamped as "foreign citizen." Naturally I was scared but showing it would have been a disaster. So I forced myself to act as assertively as I could. Pointing to the stamp, I acted as well as I ever did in my life. I calmly told the Arrow-Cross man that, "As you probably already know, this stamp states that as a foreign citizen I'm assigned to a special unit and as such I can walk freely, without escort, and without the yellow armband."

To my great surprise and relief, he said he knew about the rulings and everything was in order. He almost apologized for the intrusion and left. After that I felt very lucky and decided not to stretch my luck any longer by making those nightly visits. With another Arrow-Cross man, the outcome might have been entirely different.

Also in early November 1944 the Germans started to attach explosive charges to the bridges across the Danube River. After all, Budapest was just another city to them. It was never explained publicly that detonating the bridges was for the defense of the city. Did they really believe that this would stop the approaching Russians?

The explosives were guarded day and night by German soldiers. Yet one half of the Margaret Bridge, which linked the island with Pest, was accidentally detonated during daytime traffic. Several hundred people died there, including Endre Kabos, the exempted Jewish fencing champion of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Streetcars and trucks, together with a mass of humanity, went down into the Danube. If I remember correctly, sabotage was the official cause of the explosion but more likely faulty wiring or German negligence was the cause.

A few days later the Hungarian Army set up a heavily guarded pontoon bridge as a replacement. (Heavily guarded against whom?)

This was also the time when my Uncle Alex realized he could no longer use his new identity because of the constant inspection of civilians' of military age. I really don't know how he heard that the Portuguese legation in Budapest was issuing "passports" to those Jews who had relatives in either Portugal or Brazil (which was represented by Portugal). This, too, must have been the result of Wallenberg's heroic efforts to enlist as many neutral countries as possible to save the Jews of Budapest. (Even Fascist Spain joined this effort.) But unlike the Swiss, the Portuguese were very strict about proving family ties. My uncle showed letters from his brother in Brazil and several days later, after quite a few risky trips to the legation in Buda, he got the "passport" complete with his photo and with a vague future immigration clause. Very few such passports were issued because of the strict requirements.

I think it was Wallenberg's idea to set up a so-called "International Ghetto" in the heart of Budapest to better protect the passport holders against the marauding Arrow-Cross and to provide some food for those protected. There were Swiss and Swedish houses in this new ghetto, and houses under the protection of other countries. The Portuguese house was at the Katona Jozsef and Tatra Street corner and Jews holding Portuguese passports moved into this hastily evacuated, designated house. Alex did too.

It was a truly unique situation that a Hungarian Jew, in his own country, had to seek the protection of a foreign state.

By now the Russians were about 50 miles away from Budapest. At night we already could hear the sound of artillery and could see the sky lit from cannon fire. These raised our hopes but simultaneously the Arrow-Cross became even wilder. Now they were robbing, torturing and murdering Jews. For nightly executions they favored the banks of the Danube. They lined up their victims and after ordering them to undress, the Arrow-Cross death squad shot them. The bodies fell into the river, there were few survivors. The Arrow-Cross were equally vicious with the captured army deserters and draft evaders.

We heard rumors that according to the whim of the Arrow-Cross, the inhabitants of some of the "protected houses" were herded alongside the Danube River and executed. Yet however shaky this looked, it was still the only protection we had.

It was about this time that the "foreign citizens" of the labor service were assigned a new location. I left my old unit and dutifully reported to the newly organized battalion in a school building at Jokai Street. There were several thousands of Jews crammed in. Other "unprotected" Jews were squeezed into various synagogues under conditions that defied description. We all had something in common: we were at the mercy of the Arrow-Cross.

In this new unit we did nothing all day, just waiting for the next day. I had plenty of time to think or listen to various rumors, none of them too encouraging.

In addition to the Swiss passport, we acquired another "protective" document from the Swedish Red Cross. This one was authenticated by a Swedish official named Langler, but somehow we had not confidence in it. It might have been a fake because we paid a gentile intermediary for it. He did a booming business with these papers. The Vatican too was issuing "protective" papers but only for Jews who were either born as Christians or converted to Christianity. So my mother and I discarded this idea.

What we needed was a "protective passport" that was more authentic and more personalized than the ones we already had. The Portuguese "passport," complete with the person's picture and with a vague future immigration clause, looked like what we needed.

So I followed uncle Alex's footsteps to obtain the Portuguese "passport" for my mother, my grandmother and myself. It wasn't easy. The Portuguese legation was in a fashionable but secluded area in Buda. I had to sneak out several times from my new unit, at tremendous risk, to go to the legation. Equipped with letters from my uncle living in Brazil, and taking off my eyeglasses to look less Jewish, I headed first to the heavily guarded pontoon bridge. There I had to pass the scrutiny of the Hungarian police, Arrow-Cross men and German soldiers posted alternately at every 12-15 yards on both sides of the bridge. Luckily the bridge was always very crowded. I looked straight ahead and went past the bridge, first to Buda, then back to Pest.

Once I reached the legation I could not enter because I had arrived a few minutes earlier than the designated office hours. They wouldn't let me in sooner. I saw an open window on the second floor through which I attempted to speak to an employee, but to no avail. They were either rigid or afraid. While I was communicating with him I kept one eye on the street. Surely enough an Arrow-Cross detachment appeared at the other end of the street. It was still too early and no one would let me in. So I had to abruptly terminate the conversation and go back to Pest. Nothing accomplished.

On my next visit they accepted our application but I needed to wait for approval (perhaps from the Portuguese government). I went there

again two or three more times until our applications were approved. In a few days we would get our "passport" provided I bring the required photos. Meanwhile, we could move into the Portuguese "protected" house. This was quite an accomplishment.

So my mother, grandmother and I moved in. Alex and my mother's youngest sister were already there. I don't recall how many people were in the overcrowded apartment, but I do remember that the original tenant's belongings were there together with food that had been left on the stove uncooked. This made us feel uneasy, as if we were intruders.

In order to receive our "passport" I had to go once again to the Portuguese legation in Buda. By now I could scan the streets like radar to look for anything suspicious. Still I almost fell into an Arrow-Cross trap.

It was my habit to walk briskly and only at the last minute did I notice that the Arrow-Cross had set up a check point at the front of the Western Railroad Terminal. A truck for the captives was also stationed there. When I saw this, I slowed down. Suddenly I found something very "interesting" in a window where rebuilt electrical motors were displayed. Slowly, without looking back, I turned around and went back to find another way to reach the pontoon bridge.

Finally we got our "passport." One "passport" for the three of us, complete with our pictures. We were under the protection of Portugal for the time being. How safe the "passport" and the house were nobody wanted to test. Instead we tried to occupy ourselves with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, etc. We also changed the apartment as little as possible, thinking that the rightful owners might someday return.

Things went on like this for a few days. During this time all the young men (exactly 36) from the labor service and who were now future Portuguese citizens, received a personalized order from the Hungarian Army confirming the above facts and that we were to remain in Budapest. At the bottom of the order reference was made that it was in agreement with the German Commander of Budapest. Perhaps the commander meant it, but Eichmann had different ideas. We didn't know

about him at that time, but now we know that should a Jew escape, it was totally unacceptable to him.

A few days later a new order came stating that there would be an inspection of the passports. All 36 former labor servicemen had to return every night to the nearby school building. Uncle Alex was not included in this order because he never served in the forced labor. We were suspicious but we had yet to encounter real German duplicity. Therefore we complied with this new order although the "inspection" looming over our heads felt somewhat ominous.

Perhaps I was overly confident that no matter what this so-called inspection might bring, I would escape. Also, I had no intention of endangering my mother and grandmother after having obtained a combined passport and then not to show up at inspection. Finally, I was too curious and thought I might miss something by not showing up, and later I would regret this.

Very soon I discovered that the only thing I would have missed was the greatest adventure of my life. What was to become a reality was something I had never dreamt about.

For the next three days at about 7 p.m. we walked together to the school. We spent the night in an emptied classroom. In the mornings we returned to the Portuguese house. We all had our official documents with us. The school was filled with "other nationality" Jews, all former labor servicemen.

On the fourth evening something strange happened. After we arrived at the school a group of armed Hungarian soldiers came in. They locked the gate and posted a guard at every classroom door. We were trapped! Later, two brothers of the popular singer, Miklos Szedo, who was then living in Brazil, knocked at the locked gate and found themselves also trapped. It was too late for them and for all of us.

I became very excited. I still wanted to believe that these things were in preparation for the big inspection. But deep down I knew better.

All of this wouldn't make any sense unless there was something other than an inspection awaiting us.

Every half an hour I had to ask the guard's permission to go to the rest room. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. I couldn't go to sleep that night wondering what was going to happen next.

It was the 27th of November, 1944. We were told to get up early and line up in a formation of 10 men abreast, under the watchful eyes of the soldiers. Outside was pitch dark. One of us suddenly broke out of the formation and ran. One of the soldiers tried to shoot him but he disappeared into the darkness. Suddenly we realized that the soldiers meant business.

The column of men started to move while surrounded by the soldiers. I tried to guess where we were heading. Where would the "inspection" take place? From the inner city we passed the road to the racetrack. Then we approached the industrial districts. Our ranks were constantly swelling, as more and more similarly escorted Jews, also holding foreign "passports," joined us.

Before reaching the wide Fiumei Avenue, we passed through narrow streets with bombed out buildings. I could easily have slipped away but I thought perhaps there might be an inspection after all and I would miss it. So I stayed.

We passed Orczy Avenue and the Orczy Square. At that point the front of our long column turned to the left and we then saw our real destination: the freight railroad terminal (with limited passenger service). At that moment it became clear that the big "inspection" was a big lie. We were to be deported. (Today I believe that this was probably Eichmann's last master stroke, in spite of the agreement to honor the protective "passports.") I certainly didn't expect this turn of events. I was ill-prepared for this. My self confidence evaporated at once. I knew I had lost the bet. I always anticipated that they would take us on foot rather than ship us out by rail. That's what had happened to my aunt and other Jews I knew. So the only necessities I carried were a

toothbrush, shaving kit and a blanket. I just didn't expect this turn of events.

We were lined up alongside empty cattle cars on one side and a coal transport train on the other. Behind our train armed Hungarian soldiers and gendarmes were watching from the top of the ramp. Their rifles pointed directly at us. A few German SS men were observing the scene with interest from a distance. They appeared as if they had nothing to do with this.

It was a rather slow procedure to load the train with human cargo by counting heads. We were divided into groups and stood by the assigned boxcar. A Hungarian soldier was watching each group. He kept pacing up and down on the top of the coal ramp. Somebody asked permission to relieve himself and the soldier pointed underneath the train. Suddenly this gave me an idea. I followed him with my eyes and counted. It took him about 25 seconds each way, a total of 50 seconds. That was all the time I had to act. About fifty yards from the coal train there was a passenger train with people about to board. Behind that was the station exit. If I could only reach the passenger train undetected, I could free myself. It seemed very tempting.

I decided it was worth a try because it was my only chance. I swung into action. I checked the soldier's routine once more and it had not altered. Just before he was about to turn around to walk in the opposite direction, I asked for his permission to relieve myself. With obvious disgust, he pointed underneath the coal train just as he had done before. I crawled under it and moved quickly toward the passenger train. Several Germans, perhaps in a supervisory or advisory capacity, were coming in my direction. I glanced at their puzzled faces as I crossed their path. But because of this I couldn't risk running, which had been my original plan. So I kept walking fast without paying more attention to the Germans. This slow down prevented me from reaching the passenger train within the fifty seconds I had allocated for it. By now the guard had probably returned to his starting point and was looking for me.

Suddenly I heard a shot. I looked back and saw the soldier, a rifle in hand, yelling and running after me. I continued to run but I realized the futility of running any further because the soldier's shouts had alerted the Hungarians boarding the passenger train. So I stopped. I gambled and lost.

I think the soldier took it personally that I tried to outsmart him. He was mad and visibly exhausted. Even though my escape attempt failed, I was at peace with myself because at least I had the satisfaction that I tried. At that moment nothing else mattered to me. He wanted to know why I wanted to escape. Apparently I was supposed to obediently accept my fate. He hit me several times with the butt of his rifle. I felt the pain for weeks later but at that time I felt nothing. Calmly I told him, "Shoot me!" I meant it. He said, "No! You are going to suffer!" It was obvious that he knew more about what the future was holding for us than we did. He hit me several more times with the butt of his rifle and shoved me back to my group.

I gave up and waited for hours to be squeezed into a relatively small boxcar. This was the time I met my future companion and comrade, Ivan Rado. He was only eighteen, two years younger than I was. He had a handsome, round face, rosy cheeks, blue eyes and long silky blond hair. He looked more German than Jewish. He came from a well-to-do family and he was well read and educated.

Somehow I sensed that he felt the same way I did. So, while waiting to board the train we agreed that whenever the opportunity might arise, we would escape together. He had seen my ill-fated attempt as a guarantee that I meant it and that I was serious about it. We stuck to each other out of necessity, without ever becoming friends.

Finally it was our turn to be squeezed into the cattle car with "standing room only." The Germans locked the door. We overheard them calling out "69" and heard them mark it on the outside of the car with crayon. Sixty-nine strangers sharing a common fate. There was only one bucket for our waste.

Someone near the barbed-wired window noticed a German officer coming. The German stopped at the window and asked who spoke German. I would never have volunteered, but someone answered. The German jotted down his name: Nadas. Then the German said, "Nadas, from now on you are the commander of this boxcar and you will be responsible for the sixty-nine men aboard.

This simple German trick must have been used over and over again and probably always worked. What an ingenious idea to have the captives police themselves. (After the war I read that, thanks to this "commander" system, only nine SS guards were enough to transport 3,500 prisoners to their destiny. It was very efficient indeed.)

The train didn't move until the next day. We could hear the Russian cannons. It was very uncomfortable inside the car. The only way to rest was to sit down on the floor, legs pulled under. As people relieved themselves, the stench became unbearable.

On man, Fonai, became delirious. The Szedo brothers were lamenting how anxious they were the night before to get into the locked school just so they would not miss the train. This train! I also remember that among us were the three Kornhauser brothers, also with Portuguese "passports."

Despite all this, I regained my spirit. I said loudly, "We all have a pocketknife and together we could open up the wooden planked floor and set ourselves free."

Nadas, the "commander" had only one question, "After you got free, do you have a place to hide?" "Yes," I said proudly, thinking of the cellar under our shop. To this Nadas replied, "I have no place to go. Therefore you and everybody else will stay here with me." And that was the end of that. The Germans should have congratulated themselves for cleverly delegating one of us to be a 24-hour watchman. I really hated Nadas for this.

Around noon on the second day, the train started to move. It stopped frequently. Obviously, we were unimportant cargo. Slowly we were moving towards Austria/Germany.

I had no food or water with me. Rado was somewhat better prepared. He gave me one half of an apple, which I gratefully accepted. Thirst tormented me more than hunger. On occasions, when the train stopped near a station, a kind soul would give us a bottle filled with water. The lucky ones drank it at once.

On the fourth night of our journey we reached Hegyeshalom Station on the Austrian-Hungarian border. Normally this trip would take six hours by train, but ours wasn't a regular train.

We were ordered to leave our boxcar for the Germans to count us. Now we became official property of the Reich and since the Germans like to be precise, they took inventory. We still were given no food or water, but we were glad to stretch our limbs and breathe fresh air.

Another train was standing next to ours, filled with Hungarian soldiers en route to Germany for training. Once the Hungarians learned that we were half-starved Jews from Budapest, they became very happy. One of them had an accordion and played an old popular tune about the enchanted nights of Budapest. Other soldiers joined him in song.

While waiting to be counted, I saw an opportunity to slip away undetected into the night. I told Rado that this was the perfect time before we were taken to Germany. But Rado wanted to wait and see what would happen next. I didn't want to go alone, so I stayed.

Then something surprising happened: the Hungarian soldiers offered us their surplus bread. I was still naive. I really thought that they wanted to share they bread out of sympathy. It was only when they mingled freely among us that I realized it was for business. It was a seller's market. They demanded valuables for a slice of bread. Gold rings, necklaces, wristwatches, etc. Business was brisk. Lots of starving Jews gave their valuables for a piece of bread. I clutched my only "valuables," a cheap wristwatch and a fountain pen. I decided not to

trade them, no matter how hungry I was. I concluded that a slice of bread wouldn't help me much, but later the watch might save me. So I resisted the temptation to get temporary relief from hunger. This remains in my memory as one of the ugliest scenes during my entire "adventure."

We had to reboard the train, still without food but I think we got some water. Now I understood what kind of terrible thirst had tormented those Jews I met earlier in the summer, squeezed into a sealed boxcar. I never experienced this kind of thirst before. I could not think of anything else but water. If occasionally we got some water, a few minutes later we were just as thirsty as before. I had difficulty understanding this phenomenon. There was a physician among us, and when I asked him the reason for this constant thirst, he explained that it was internal fever caused from hunger. But the hunger didn't bother me as much as the unquenchable thirst.

The train started to move again to cross into Germany. At the beginning I tried to memorize the names of the stations like Zurndorf, Neusiedl, etc. to find my way back to Hungary. After a while I stopped because I could no longer keep track of the various Austrian villages and I fell asleep.

By the next day we were somewhere in Austria. The train moved either slowly or stood sidetracked. I tried to find out what direction we were heading, but nobody could be certain. I felt miserable for not having escaped at the border station while I was still in Hungary. I should never have listened to Rado. There was a subdued, eerie silence in the car. Everybody was either too weak or resigned to make any noise. At nightfall somehow I fell asleep.

On the fifth night of our journey the train stopped at a large railroad station. Somebody exclaimed in disbelief, "It looks like Sopron!" Others said that was impossible because Sopron (Odenburg) is in Hungary, near the Austrian border. Everybody tried to get a glimpse through the narrow, barb-wired window. Then someone recognized a number of Arrow-Cross men in their familiar uniforms. We were overjoyed at the sight of them and could have embraced them. Miraculously, we were brought back to our "Motherland."

We all had the same thought: the Germans bowed to international pressure and, however belatedly, they were not going to take us out of Hungary because all of us held foreign passports.

Shortly after midnight we were ordered out of the train. We lined up and started to march on foot into the night, escorted by the local Arrow-Cross and a few Germans. We were very exhausted from lack of food and water and from being packed tightly for five days. After each 2-3 kilometers (1-1 1/2 miles) we needed a brief rest. Again I could have easily escaped but since the Germans apparently recognized our passports, I thought it would have been foolish.

Instead of escaping I tried to find out if we were heading back to Budapest. I asked those around me who were familiar with the area. No one could figure it out because we were walking parallel to the border and not towards Budapest. The destination was a mystery, but I decided to wait and see.

Dr. Rust, a Jewish lawyer, was walking in front of me. He had a raincoat over his winter coat. He wanted to protect his winter coat because adequate clothing could make the difference between life and death in a cold winter like this. An Arrow-Cross man noticed the two coats and started to pester Dr. Rust. "You have two coats, and because of you, a Hungarian is freezing. Give one coat to me." Apparently he was that freezing Hungarian. What a strange coincidence.

Rust refused this. The Nazi became adamant. "Give me one of your coats or I will shoot you!" But Rust didn't budge. "Go ahead, shoot me." Rust sensed correctly that the Arrow-Cross man was just bluffing and wouldn't have dared to kill him, now German property. So the Hungarian Nazi gave up and tried his luck elsewhere in the group. This was the first time I witnessed an open, barefaced robbery attempt at gunpoint. (Unfortunately, not even the two coats could save Dr. Rust. Later he died in the labor camp. Together with other victims, his body was exhumed after the war and reburied in Budapest, in the mass grave of victims of Fertorakos.)

After three or four rest stops we finally arrived at a village on a hilltop, right on the border in the foothills of the Alps. This was Fertorakos, population 100% ethnic German. Officially it belonged to Hungary. I had never heard about this God-forsaken place before.

It was still unclear what the Germans intended to do with us. We were placed in half-open barns with strict orders not to leave it. But my thirst was stronger than my fear of disobeying orders and I ventured to the village street in search of water. An officer of the Todt-organization (the construction branch of the Germany Army) noticed me and chased me back, pistol-whipping me. The ethnic German peasant, owner of the barn, saw an excellent business opportunity by selling water from his well. "Modestly" he charged 10 pengos (maybe $5 in today's dollars) for a bucket of water. He did a booming business and he "worked" tirelessly without ever stopping to satisfy our unquenchable thirst.

Marauding local Hungarian Nazis began preying on us. They too tried to become rich, at gunpoint, due to our misfortune. But the Germans didn't like competition and ordered them out of the camp. After all, we were German property and everything we had belonged to the Reich.

Soon afterwards, under death threats, we had to surrender our remaining valuables and our pocketknives too. Apparently the Germans took no chances. (I still kept my wristwatch hidden in my coat lining.)

It was bitter cold and windy but fully dressed, in my coat and wrapped in my blanket, I managed to fall asleep on the barn's naked ground.

The next morning, December 2, 1944, we were issued picks and shovels. But no food. This was the sixth day we hadn't eaten. We were led to the border to dig trenches which were supposed to protect Germany against the advancing Russians.

A German officer approached us asking who spoke German. Instinctively I knew that this was going to be another deja vu. The very same trick that had occurred when we were squeezed into the train.

Invariably there always was a volunteer. This time one of the Portuguese passport holders stepped forward. "Good," said the German, "you will be the leader of this group." He was given a stick, like a baseball bat. This stick had a dual purpose. "First, with this you will measure the width and depth of the trench. Second, with this stick you will beat those who don't work hard enough."

And so a Kapo was born. I knew him from the Portuguese house. He was a decent, good-humored fellow (I forgot his name) and I don't think he really wanted this job. It was too late for him, but not for me. I don't know how the poor chap performed his duties, but I wanted no part of it. The future became perfectly clear. Slavery revived in its crudest form in the 20th century.

The Germans would use me until the last ounce of my strength and then discard me whenever I became useless to them. Not me! If I couldn't fight them, I was certainly not going to work for them. I would take a chance to escape this fate. Should I fail in this attempt, I would rather freeze to death in the Alps than serve the Nazis. I was never more determined.

At nightfall we returned to the village where we got our first meal in six days: a little soup. We also noticed that the Germans already started to build a tall fence around the village. We had to act immediately. I told Rado and a few other comrades of ours my intentions. Rado agreed at once. Two young fellows, both "Portuguese" wanted to join us. But at the last minute they wanted to wait for just one more day. Rado and I disagreed, especially since we knew that eventually we had to split into pairs so as not to arouse suspicion once we left the camp.

We had never been in this part of Hungary. Naturally we didn't want to end up in Austria. Therefore we inquired through someone who was from the region, the names of the neighboring villages. The name of the first ethnic German village was Balf, which had no meaning in Hungarian. Later we found out that its German name was "Wolf," and Balf was the Hungarian version of it.

Anyhow we said goodbye to our comrades with no fear that someone might betray us. The two other fellows escorted us to the official perimeter of the camp. (Both survived Fertorakos and ended up in Mauthausen, which I found out when I met one of them after the war.) Now we were on our own. What mattered to us most at that moment was that we were free. At least for the time being.

It was about 9 p.m. when we started out into the unknown, fully aware of the dangers and risks facing us. It was a very cold, cloudless night illuminated by the bright moon. Outside the village we found a path leading downhill into the dark unknown. We felt that while we could be seen from faraway, we could hardly distinguish anything ahead of us. We thought that at any moment a German guard could shoot us. Along the path were trees which from a distance looked like humans.

When we reached the bottom of the hill we finally got out of the moonlight. Our path led us to a forest and our eyes became accustomed to the protective darkness. We only had a vague idea which way to go. We kept walking in the forest now with the help of the moonlight. The path ended at the shore of Lake Neusidel which is between Austria and Hungary. There we found a rowboat chained to a tree but it had no oars. So we continued walking in the thin forest on foot.

Probably because we were hungry, our senses were blunted and we almost bumped into a group of loudspeaking German soldiers and villagers. We had time to only crouch down and freeze. They were so close that I was afraid that they might hear my heart beating. Fortunately they had no dogs, only lanterns. They didn't see us.

From the outcrop of a hill we could get oriented. For the first time, with the help of the moonlight, we could see far ahead. We saw only flat land ahead of us, intersected by either a river or a treelined highway, and we agreed to head in that direction.

After descending the hills, we found a completely deserted highway. Our confidence grew as we continued on the highway. I suddenly experienced an overwhelming exhaustion that I had never experienced before. Undoubtedly this was caused from starvation. At

every 1/10th kilometer marker I had to rest and would fall asleep immediately. Rado was somewhat stronger and woke me up each time. He was impatient to get as far away from Fertorakos as could under the cover of the dark.

Finally, we came across a signpost at the edge of the village. It read, "Balf" and we didn't know whether the village was in Austria or in Hungary. Then suddenly I remembered that just before we left the camp, someone told me that was the name of the nearest village. Not only were our senses blunted due to the long absence of food, but our brain functions too were slowed down. Anyhow, at least we knew for sure that we were heading in the right direction. It was like a shot in the arm.

We didn't want to risk passing through the village by continuing on the highway. So we decided to go around the village. This proved to be an arduous task, especially in our condition. We climbed up the hills which were filled with vineyards. It was about midnight when we allowed ourselves a fifteen minute pause in the village cemetery. Here it was peaceful and for the time being we felt safe. Jokingly I remarked that I was not afraid of the dead, only of the living. But we had to keep going because we thought the further we would get from Fertorakos, the better our chances of getting back to Budapest.

Our spirits were rather high since things were going well. We tried to ignore the fact that this was the sixth day we hadn't eaten solid food (not counting the watery soup we were given in the camp just a few hours before). We just kept climbing up and down the hills, past Balf, and we were back to the Sopron-Budapest highway. By now we were totally exhausted. We no longer had the stamina (nor the desire) to go around the next village of Nagyczenk. We just kept walking through the village bisected by the highway.

Suddenly a German Army convoy appeared behind us. It was probably from Austria. This gave us an idea. How about asking them for a ride to Budapest? This would be the fastest and safest travel for us because no Hungarian gendarme or Arrow-Cross man would dare to stop a German Army convoy. We even imagined what a story we could tell back home if we could get on one of those trucks. Alas, it never

came to this. The Germans ignored our request. So we continued on foot across the village. I grew weaker from hunger but kept marching with frequent rest.

With daybreak, pedestrians appeared on the highway, looking at us with curiosity and perhaps suspicion. We had to find a place to rest and eat something during the day so we could continue the trip at night. Budapest was more than 150 miles away. This day was December 3, 1944, the longest day in my life.

As we reached the next village of Eszterhaza, we noticed light in the windows of one of the homes. We had already invented a believable story--at least we thought so. According to the story, we were from Budapest and came here looking for accommodations for our parents who wanted to flee the city before the advancing Russians. What we had not known was that the entire Austrian-Hungarian border was already dotted with forced labor camps for fortification work--courtesy of the Arrow-Cross.

All the Jews of Budapest, including my aunt, who were rounded up by the eager Arrow-Cross men were either herded here on foot, or like us by freight train. By now the Third Reich was desperate. The Germans wanted to stop the Red Army with trenches dug by Jews, regardless of their age, sex or health condition. Should the Jews die like flies while rendering their last service to the Reich, the better it would be for everyone.

But we were unaware of this "grandiose" German plan. So we knocked on the door. We told our "story" to the young farmhand as he let us in. He listened to us with sympathy but told us their house was too small, and it wasn't even theirs. It belonged to Count Szecheny's estate. Then we asked for some food. He was really very poor. He could offer us only some cooked kernels of corn. We tried to eat in a civilized way to hide our immense hunger. (When we later met him after the war he told us that he never in his life had seen anybody eat the way we did.)

He suggested we see the manager, Joseph Nagy, who could probably help. There were already a few refugees from Debrecen (Eastern Hungary). Encouraged by our initial "success" we went to see Nagy. He was about 35 years old. We repeated our story to him and he listened to it with no expression. Somehow I didn't like his penetrating eyes. Curtly he pointed to a house where the other refugees were staying and promised to bring some bread and milk.

The refugees, mostly older men, were eager to hear the latest news from Budapest. In return they told us about the atrocities committed by the Russians. After that, there was nothing else to talk about. More than two hours passed since we saw the manager and we became suspicious. But it was warmer and safer in the house than it had been outside. It was tempting to stay and wait for the promised food.

Finally the door opened. A gendarme came in, followed by Nagy. Instantly we knew we lost. There was no doubt in our minds that Nagy brought the gendarme. After a few minutes of small talk, the gendarme asked for identification from everybody in the room. Naturally, we knew that we were the real target of his curiosity. I don't even remember what documents Rado showed him. I gave the gendarme an expired streetcar pass (when I was an apprentice) with my photo on it. It was the only paper that didn't have my religion. Probably because of this the gendarme asked for more documents and he named a few. When we couldn't produce any of those, he told us he was escorting us to the station house in Hegyko for clarification. This was about a three mile walk.

He came for us on motorcycle and ordered us to walk ahead of him. He forbade Rado and me to talk to each other. He also warned us that if we tried to escape he would shoot us.

Contrary to their reputation, this gendarme was a relatively decent fellow and I could talk to him. I walked near him and tried to establish rapport. I told him that we were Jews holding Portuguese passports and should be considered free foreign citizens. He had heard about this and would have let us go if his superiors had not been expecting us. He told

us they surely would honor our passports. (I wasn't so sure about that.)

Encouraged by his unusually polite, even sympathetic, attitude I asked him how they could already know about us at the station house. He told me that Nagy went to the station house and reported us as being suspicious young men and as such should be checked out.

His revelation didn't surprise me a bit. I just wanted to hear this from the gendarme to set the record straight. Naturally, I could not ask him to give me a written statement about this.

At the station house the gendarmes treated us with respect, perhaps due to our foreign citizenship, as they waited for the arrival of two colonels. They even gave us a glass of milk and a slice of bread. This was our first real meal.

One of the colonels, named Molnar, looked rather distinguished and intelligent, which was not at all characteristic of the Hungarian gendarmerie. But when we told him that we were "Portuguese Jews," he wanted nothing to do with us. Instead he sent us over to his colleague, Colonel Szabo. This was Molnar's opposite, boorish and unpleasant. He was not impressed a bit by our Portuguese papers and disregarded the army's official order made out in our name requesting all military personnel accept our passports. Szabo ordered that we should be turned over to the German authorities in the Fertorakos camp (which we had blurted out) from which we had escaped. This was the worst of all possible scenarios. The Germans surely would use us as an example to discourage all future attempts to escape.

Now the gendarmes became nasty and hostile because they thought we tried to fool them. Luckily the gendarmes were too lazy to take us back to Fertorakos by motorcycle, when the camp at nearby Hidegseg was so much closer. This was when we realized how much we had wandered the night before, despite the detours and the difficult terrain. So the gendarmes agreed between themselves to disobey Szabo's order. They seated us at the rear of each motorcycle and took us to the camp in Hidegseg. This was the first time we heard about the existence of other camps.

When we arrived at the camp the gendarmes took us to a group of German officers. The gendarmes could not speak German, so they demanded that we act as translators and interpreters for them. It was quite a comical situation. Ill-willed as they were now, the gendarmes fabricated lies and distortions about us: like, we bought our passports, were spies, etc. Translating these lies would have been tantamount to our death sentence. Naturally we couldn't translate this. Alternately with Rado we made omissions, changes or at least we tried to soften the gendarmes' report. We did this quickly and without hesitation. But no matter how much we altered the report, the fact remained that we were escaped Jews.

Then one of the Germans, a tower of flesh, asked something from me in a dialect that could have been Prussian. With my school German I could not understand him. The German got very angry because he thought I was just pretending. It was the crazy German notion that every Jew could speak German, meaning Yiddish. He raised his arm to slap me (I would probably have spitted out half of my teeth), when Rado rescued me. He understood what the German wanted to know and he answered. After that I stepped back and let Rado handle the "interview." Anyhow, our situation was bad.

Meanwhile Schopek, the ethnic German camp commander, arrived. For a while he didn't dare open his mouth in the presence of "real" Germans. But he probably felt that he had to say something partly to flatter the Germans and partly to bolster his own ego. He turned to us and said bragging, in an ugly sounding Schwabian dialect, "We Germans can escape from anywhere, but no one can escape from us." ("What a jerk," I thought to myself. "What in the hell did the Germans have to do with our capture?") Then he mumbled something to the two armed Schwabs standing nearby about taking us somewhere. He turned towards us, "Leave your belongings here. You won't need them anymore."

We pretended that we didn't understand him. Then we picked up our meager possessions and left with the ethnic German guards. Again we were instructed not to talk to each other, nor try to flee.

We had no idea where they were taking us, but we began to realize that we were about to become an important "case" like celebrities, which like a snowball would keep growing. Everybody who got involved was making it bigger so they could profit from it like a promotion, a medal a leave from the army, or who knew what else.

It was late afternoon when we arrived at Balf again. The two Schwabs led us to a one story, white-washed building. At the entrance was a large sign, "Whermacht Strafe" (literally meaning "army punishment," something similar to "military justice.") Either way, it didn't look too encouraging to an ordinary German, much less to captured Jews like us.

We heard from our guards that they were waiting for the arrival of Captain Heinig of the Gestapo to interrogate us. Obviously our case was getting bigger. Uneasily, we waited for about an hour until the captain came.

He was about my height (5'6"), in a dark civilian suit, wearing glasses. He looked like a strict school principal. First Ivan was called into his office and came out fifteen to twenty minutes later. I noticed his face was red but I attributed this to his excitement.

Then it was my turn. Captain Heinig was sitting behind his desk writing a report. Also in the room was a Whermacht soldier, serving as a bodyguard. Finally the interrogation started, in German of course. First he asked me whether I too have a Portuguese passport. I said, "Yes." The next question was, "Were you born in Lisbon?" I answered, "No, I was born in Budapest." To this he replied, "You don't need a passport, you are a Jew and your face is your passport." (I started to feel very uncomfortable after this opening salvo.)

After this, he wanted to know from where and how we escaped. Quickly I decided not to mention the name of Fertorakos, where we were already German property. Rather, I substituted with what I thought would be less incriminating, "Hegyeshalom," another border village I knew. Although it was much further to the East, Heinig could not notice this.

In my best, most polite literary German, I told Heinig that we were escorted by members of the Hungarian National Socialist Party (sic) to Hegyeshalom. But we were told by the Portuguese legation to return to Budapest should we be taken away.

Ignoring this, he was interested in one thing only, "The group that escorted you, did it have a leader?" I sensed the coming danger. After a brief hesitation I said, "I guess it had a leader."

"Did you ask the leader's permission to escape?" With this he rose from his chair.

"What a stupid question," I thought to myself. "How can I answer this?" Actually it really didn't matter. Whatever I said, Heinig worked himself into a frenzy. "So you were the chosen people! You were for Horthy and Kallay, Szalasi (the Arrow-Cross leader) was a dog to you!" During this tirade of his, he started hitting, kicking, punching me, pulling my hair, ears, whatever he could do to inflict physical pain on me. But the only pain I felt was that I couldn't hit him back.

This went on for a while and I saw the saliva coming out of his mouth. It was my first encounter with a sadist in action.

Then something extraordinary happened. The soldier who was quietly observing the scene suddenly started to talk. "That's enough!" He went behind Heinig and forced his superior's arms down. It worked like magic. Captain Heinig immediately calmed down. With this my "interrogation" came to an abrupt end.

Now the two Schwabs were ordered to take us to an even higher authority, to the Gestapo headquarters in Sopron. (I can't remember, but I think this time we took the train. In any case, on that long day and night before, we must have walked at least 25 miles or more.)

It was late evening when we arrived at the Gestapo's headquarters. I noticed a lot of empty liquor bottles on the floor next to the wall. One drunk Gestapo man beat us just for being Jews. This was our reception.

Apparently the Gestapo didn't know what to do with us. Then it occurred to someone to put us in the local jail where there were already holding a few Jews (also for escaping). And so we landed in jail without having committed any crime. It was a strange twist of fate. I was placed in cell No. 28 and alone. Rado was in another cell. The longest day of my life came to an end. Exhaustedly, I fell asleep shivering in the unheated, dark cell.

The following day Rado was placed in my cell, probably because his cell was needed for someone else. (Later we discovered that the jail was crowded with criminals.) This was the first time since our capture that we could talk with each other.

We discussed our experiences in detail, analyzing the causes of our downfall and what we might expect now. There was never any doubt in our minds that Joseph Nagy denounced us at the gendarmerie which thus started the chain of events that landed us here. This was the first time I could tell Ivan about my conversation with the gendarme while being escorted to the station house and how the gendarme confirmed my suspicion about Nagy.

And so began a new chapter in our adventures. The prison was old, three or four stories, with thick walls. There was no running water, plumbing or heat. The electricity was centrally controlled. It was a place for hardened criminals.

The daily routine was awful. Every morning at 6 a.m. a gong sounded and the lights were turned on. The warden unlocked the door. All the prisoners had to line up and carry a bucket which contained our waste. Then in a regulated fashion we took the bucket down to the courtyard and emptied it into the sewer opening. We marched back to the cell. No talking was allowed. Guards were posted everywhere. Then we filled our pitchers with cold water to drink and wash. The menu was always the same. For breakfast and dinner: a slice of dry bread and a bowl of some watery, unrecognizable soup. For lunch another kind of thin soup and a bowl of vegetables, mostly sugar beets.

All day we sat shivering from the cold waiting for something to happen. We were in a gloomy mood. After a few days of this prison routine, we'd rather be shot than continue indefinitely this way. Especially since we could only guess what the Germans were planning to do with us. None of the possibilities looked promising. Whatever the future held for us, at least we had tried to alter the course of events. This gave me satisfaction in spite of our failure.

We noticed that the guards treated us with a certain deference perhaps because of our status, "prisoners of the Germans." They refrained from issuing us uniforms. This made us bolder. We requested an audience with the prison director to ask him to notify the Portuguese legation about our situation. He refused this, but at least we tried.

Three long days passed in jail when on December 6, 1944 Sopron was bombed for the first time. Whether it was during the day or night, or the Americans or the British did it, we didn't know. But they did a good job as we later found out. We hoped there was more to come.

Air raid alarms sounded almost daily and it was compulsory for everybody to go down to the cellar. I had hoped that a bomb would hit the prison so that, if lucky, I could make a break to freedom. If not lucky, it would still be better to be dead than to live in prison. In any case, this was a welcome break in the prison routine. While in the shelter we could talk to other prisoners. That's how we met two other Jewish prisoners, Gorog and Jordan. Their stories were similar to ours and they were equally puzzled about the future.

Two or three days after the first bombings, a guard announced that a German had come for us. The first thing we thought was that they were going to execute us. The SS-man didn't bother to talk. Through the winding streets he led us to a two-story modern villa which had been damaged by bombs. Inside I recognized this as the Gestapo's headquarters where we had been before. He ordered us to clean up the mess in the building. The Gestapo lived pretty well and we were given some of their food. Empty liquor bottles were strewn all over. Later we found out they were at the very top of the Gestapo, the Internal Security Service: SD (Sicherheit Dienst).

In the evening the same German escorted us back to prison. Obviously the Germans wanted to make use of us until some higher official would decide our fate. This went on for several days. "Our" SS-man became friendlier. He asked us our names and professions. I had the impression that he liked me more than Rado because I was a lathe operator and Ivan wanted to study medicine. Somehow we learned his name was Kaufmann, and he certainly was not a Jew.

One day, on the way to the Gestapo, we asked our German "friend" if we could buy postcards. He nodded in approval. The next day we mailed postcards to our parents, informing them of our whereabouts. We also sent them news that the remaining Portuguese Jews in Fertorakos were to be forwarded to the legation. We asked for their help.

A few days later, while working at the Gestapo, another SD-man became interested in us. He was tall and handsome like a movie star. Apparently he liked Rado more because of his professional choice. He noticed that Rado had a black eye thanks to Captain Heinig's interrogation. "Who did this to you, not one of us?" he asked Ivan. But Rado had the quick sense not to reveal the truth. Instead he said that he accidentally hit himself on the window at night. If Rado had told the truth, the Gestapo-man would probably have said that it was a Jewish lie because they don't do things like that. Of course, he should have known better.

Anyhow I never learned his name or his rank. I simply addressed each of them as "Herr Kommandant." After all, every German was a self-appointed commander to a Jew.

What motivated him we never learned but I wish to remember him as one of the few kind men I had come across. The main thing he showed was genuine goodwill towards us especially since we were in no position to reciprocate. We were astonished that he brought us his own food each day, from soup to cake. As I already mentioned, the Gestapo were fed extremely well by any standard.

Of course food sharing couldn't go on unnoticed for long. One day he told us ruefully that he had to discontinue the food sharing because the others were teasing him for being a "Jew lover." We still thought that, if needed, we could communicate with him.

We tried to get some information from regarding our future. We asked him if we could get back to one of those camps (so we could begin all over again). He said we could not because our case was now in the regional headquarters in Vienna and the decision will come from there. Now we knew we really had made a big "hit" with the Germans.

Meanwhile our new routine continued. Herr Kommandant Kaufmann came for us every morning. In the evening he escorted us back to prison. But one early morning the air raid alarm lasted longer than usual and we even received our lunch in the shelter. There I noticed a man who didn't touch his meal. Since I had regained my will to live, I asked him if I could eat his portion too. He didn't mind. He looked distressed and I asked what his problem was. In amazement, he told me he was a Hungarian gentile, and the Portuguese legation hired him to drive a truck to Fertorakos to bring the 36 Portuguese Jews back to Budapest. (No doubt this was the direct result of our postcards sent to our parents who contacted the legation.) He showed us the list of names of the 36 Portuguese Jews. Our names were there too. We were not abandoned after all. But the Germans confiscated his truck, arrested him as a spy and put him in prison. He saw no way out.

We were elated and told him we would tell our "friend" at the Gestapo about him and his mission. Soon perhaps we could all go home.

As soon as we could, we told our "Gestapo friend" about our discovery. But he gave us a cold shoulder. He had already known about the Hungarian and his mission. He reiterated the official German version, that he was a spy and brought the Portuguese list for business purposes. He accepted this version without question, like a robot. This was the German way. We couldn't stress the issue any further for fear of losing his goodwill towards us. Again we lost hope.

One night in prison we were awakened by a noisy commotion. During the next air raid we saw about 100 newcomers. They were Jewish tradesmen who had worked in a Gestapo-owned shop in Budapest. Many of them had their wives with them.

Vaguely I remembered hearing about these "privileged" Jews. They were untouchable to Hungarian Nazis because they were under the protection of the Gestapo as long as they were needed. These "Gestapo-Jews" were not prisoners like us. They were placed just temporarily in prison until the Gestapo could find a suitable location for the shop. They could have escaped while in Budapest, but they chose to move with the Gestapo. During the eight months they spent with the Germans, they grew confident that the Germans would not harm them. (After all, by now the Germans knew them by name.)

It was truly a strange, symbiotic relationship. The Gestapo-men needed the Jews and the Jews needed the Germans. How it had worked, as I saw it was under the pretext that Jews performed "important" tasks in the war production. Thus Gestapo justified the need to set up and supervise the shops with Jewish labor and equipment, sometimes supplied voluntarily by the Jews. In this way the Gestapo-men enjoyed a good and profitable life in Budapest and avoided being sent to the Russian front.

In reality, instead of war production, the Jews were serving the Gestapo's personal needs like making tailor-made new uniforms, shiny new boots, etc. In return, the Gestapo provided much needed protection for the Jews against the Hungarian Nazis.

A cozy relationship developed between those Jews and Germans. If any one of the Jews wanted to visit a relative or had some personal business while in Budapest, all he had to do was ask (and bribe) one of the Germans to escort him. No Hungarian policeman, gendarme or Arrow-Cross man would have dared to stop a Jew escorted by a German. Everybody knew these rules and played the game accordingly.

While in Budapest, the Gestapo plundered a number of Jewish stores, confiscating their wares and merchandise and storing them

adjacent to the shop. The Gestapo considered the loot to be their personal property after the war was over. Therefore the loot was carried wherever the Gestapo moved, first to Sopron and later to Austria. In this way the Gestapo laid its hands on entire stocks of a well-known men's clothing store (Sugar & Barna), a large chandelier and lighting fixture store (The House of Chandeliers, on Terez Boulevard), and a printing shop, etc., all which certainly had nothing to do with the war efforts.

Meanwhile the Gestapo of Sopron requisitioned the Evangelical Teachers school building (14 Kepezde Street) and ordered us to help set up the various shops and stockrooms for the loot. When we saw the Gestapo shops and the Jewish laborers being settled in their new home, it was again time for us to get into action. We approached our "benefactor" at the Gestapo, for the last time, and asked him to have us transferred from prison to this Jewish group. We told him that since we spent only nights in prison and worked in the shops during the day, it would be simpler and better for us to join the group. In this way we hoped the Germans would eventually forget about executing us and we would also get a second chance to escape. He said he would see what he could do.

We never knew with certainty whether it was his doing, but a few days later, together with the other Jewish prisoners, we were told to move in with the original Jewish group.

According to their usual practice, Germans always named a leader for any group. I think Deutsch, our Jewish leader was handpicked in Budapest. He was handsome, militaristic in appearance, wore shiny boots, and shouted at everybody like a real German. The Germans really liked him. But Deutsch did this just for appearance sake and to influence the Germans. The power didn't corrupt him. He remained one of us. He wife was with him too. However, the other Jews looked down on us because they thought we were "jailbirds" or real criminals. This didn't bother us much since Rado and I knew that we wouldn't stay here too long.

Despite the seemingly cozy relationship between Germans and Jews, when it came to work, Jews were treated like slaves. Perhaps this

was just a show or it was to ease their corrupt consciences that they were doing a service for the Reich--and not for themselves. I remember when we moved a heavy printing machine that the supervising Oberscharführer, a tower of flesh, carried a cane to hit those who didn't work hard enough.

Occasionally we had to go to work at headquarters, where our Gestapo "career" began. I recall one day we had to dust the fine Persian carpets outside the villa. When the air raid alarm was sounded, they didn't allow us to go down to the shelter. But it was satisfying to watch the Germans running scared. For us the bombs were the least dangerous. (We could have escaped during the air raid but we waited to hear news from home first.)

Late one evening Kaufmann motioned for me to follow him into his room. (He already knew my last name. Others called a Jewish male Isaac and a female Sarah. This was the standard name in Nazi Germany.) He pointed to a medium sized suitcase and asked me to pick it up and carry it. It was extremely heavy and the contents made a metallic sound. Perhaps there were gold and silver objects in it, his bloodstained personal spoil.

Even before this, I had observed that the Gestapo-men didn't trust each other. Whenever they left for a day or two on assignment they took their valuables with them, including Persian carpets adorning their rooms. The only remaining items were the empty liquor bottles in the corridor.

This time was different. I followed Kaufmann through the winding streets of Sopron having placed the suitcase on my shoulders because of its weight. I could not carry it otherwise. Finally we arrived at the home of a local Schwab who had been waiting for us. Now I understood the purpose for this trip. The SS-man found a permanent, safe place for his loot.

Now the question was, what was next? Certainly he wanted no one to know where he hid his amassed personal wealth. Maybe under the pretext that I had tried to flee he was going to shoot me and the case

would be closed. This was the thought that crossed my mind. But we returned to the compound.

Christmas time was coming and the Gestapo was preparing their own celebration. The highlight was to be a super festive meal. The Gestapo was very resourceful in collecting quantities of delicacies otherwise unavailable to ordinary folks. Various trucks brought apples in large open crates, and 20-25 greasy barrels of lard. The barrels were not only slippery, but very heavy too (about 300 pounds). Only two men could carry them, under SS supervision of course. Once a barrel almost fell on us. The guard helped us stop this sliding barrel. Then he cleaned his greasy hands on the coat I was wearing. It was dehumanizing.

A truckload of live pigs arrived and were placed in a temporary holding pen in the school's courtyard which we had built. While the Gestapo was preparing for a holiday feast, our food was passable. But the cook must have mixed something into the food because most of us suffered from diarrhea.

The day before Christmas the pigs were slaughtered. The cook did the honors while we held the unfortunate animals. He wanted to show off his skill to the assembled Gestapo personnel. Half of the spectators were Gestapo women who enjoyed the "show." The cook tried to stun the pigs with an axe by hitting them on the head. More often than not the cook missed because the poor animals were wriggling. It was an awful scene.

Afterwards, I remarked to Rado that should the Germans decide to execute us, the same crowd would come to watch. The parallel was obvious. But the Germans showed no sign of what they intended to do with us. We guessed that for the time being they were just going to use us as laborers.

Actually, the Gestapo was pretty confident that nobody from the original group would try to flee. After all, they could have escaped while in Budapest. Since we newcomers were integrated with the original

group, apparently the Germans felt they could treat us the same way. They didn't guard us or lock us up.

December 24, 1944. Finally the long awaited holiday arrived. The dining hall was festively decorated. In the center of the wall was a painting of the Fuehrer, with a stern look on his face. On one side of the painting was a large black and white flag of the SS draped on the wall, and a large flag with the swastika, on the other side. In addition, on the other walls there were large flags with swastikas. It was the perfect holiday decoration in Nazi style. I think I remember seeing a Christmas tree in a corner. The long table was impeccably set with nice plates and flatware and a bottle of wine at each setting. The mood was set for a joyous celebration but we Jews were not invited.

We still had not heard anything from our parents, despite the postcards we sent them. Often Rado and I would wonder what had happened. Perhaps they hadn't received all the cards or they couldn't help us. Unexpectedly, we received an answer this day. One of the Jews told Rado that he had a visitor from Budapest, an old lady.

We both got very excited. This would be the first news we were about to receive from our parents since we were taken from Budapest nearly a month ago. (Actually it seemed much longer.)

She was a thin, greying, sixty year old Hungarian woman. In her suitcase she brought a peasant outfit for Rado, some canned food, money and a complete set of false papers, tailor made for him. Only the last name was changed from the Jewish sounding Rado to Pal, and of course, the religion. Otherwise every detail on the documents were like his own. It must have cost his parents a fortune. Of course, I was very disappointed to not receive any news and help from my mother. It was only after the war that I learned that my mother did contact Ivan's parents and they had agreed together that they would try to find a willing and trustworthy person to help both of us. But when they found such a person, in their parental selfishness, they simply ignored me and concentrated their efforts on rescuing their son only.

The lady requested we call her "Aunt" Ilonka. She brought a letter to Rado from his parents. In this letter they advised him to try to get back to Budapest with this lady, leaving me behind. (This was the only reference to me.) I was shocked! It wasn't only against common decency and honor, but it was an outright betrayal. However, deep down I agreed that one young man had a better chance than two. The way they had prepared his rescue made this especially true. But they completely ignored their promise to my mother by not coordinating the rescue efforts with her.

I felt let down and made no effort to join Rado and the lady. She too was interested only in Rado, after all, he was her client and his parents hired her to save their son.

It was late in the afternoon. Nobody was working. The Gestapo-men were busy with the last minute details of the holiday party preparations. They paid no attention to us. The lady thought it better if she left now and met Rado at the railroad station about 9 p.m. Disappointed as I was I began to think of making the journey alone and pondered various alternatives for escape.

It was dark now and the loud and noisy SS-party got started. They ate, drank, sang merrily, celebrating the birth of an ancient Jew, named Jesus. Unexpectedly, Ivan came back. Despite his parents' advice, he suggested that we should leave together as soon as possible. I never asked him for the reason. Was it honor, comradeship, or because he trusted my head more than Ilonka's?

I was pleasantly surprised and was about to pack my few belongings when a small miracle happened. A young fellow from the original Gestapo-shop Jews, asked us if we would be interested in buying his set of false papers. He felt quite safe with the Germans and therefore didn't think he would need them. He was totally unaware of our plans.

I had no money. But Rado had just received money from his parents and he bought the papers for me. This happened at the very last minute. Without the papers I don't think I would have made it.

(After the war I discovered that the man actually existed and the documents were real. I didn't meet him because he had moved from Budapest. Whether they were stolen or he sold them, I will never know.)

According to the documents his name was Peter Voros (Red! not the best sounding name). He was illegitimate by birth (also not the best). He was born in 1908 and I was born in 1924. He worked in an aircraft factory as a mechanic. His I.D. card had his picture on it and he was exempted from the military. He also had a driver's license with his photo. There wasn't much resemblance between us. While I was only 20, he was 36. But I couldn't afford to be choosey. I glanced at the name and the other data, and I slipped the papers into my coat pocket.

We were almost ready to leave and meet "aunt" Ilonka at the station. The only thing left to do was to say goodbye to Deutsch (our "Kapo") and ask him to cover for us as long as he could by delaying reporting our disappearance to the Germans. He promised. This was a considerable risk on his part. He didn't try to change our decision, nor were we afraid that he might betray us. (After the war was over I met one of the Jews from that group. He told me that the Gestapo didn't make a big fuss about our disappearance.)

By now the party was in earnest. The Gestapo men and women were singing happily patriotic and Nazi tunes, fueled with ample food and drink. This was the time to step out into the silent night, Christmas night. It could have been very romantic if the circumstances had been different. The streets were deserted. The snow was falling and already thick on the pavement. A lovely night in a loveless city.

We wanted to get away from the now merry Gestapo as fast as we could. But, we didn't know which way the railroad station was nor did we dare knock on a window and ask for directions. We were just two blocks away from our German "hosts" when we heard heavy rhythmic steps, muffled by the snow. It sounded like a patrol. Quickly we moved to a nearby doorway. Too late. The two city policemen had already seen us. They ordered us to come under a streetlight so they could see us better. My first thought was, if returned to the Gestapo, we would be cut to pieces--alive.

The policemen asked for identification papers. Rado produced his tailor made documents. The only one he withheld was his military leave permit from a local unit, which they could have checked. Therefore they questioned him about his military status to which Rado managed to give a satisfactory answer. Then it was my turn. I had read my false documents only once. The policemen meticulously checked my answers against the data on the documents. Reluctantly, I showed them the employee I.D. card with the picture and they saw that I was exempted from the military. I tried to thicken my voice to sound like a 36 year old man.

We were requested to open our packages so they could be satisfied that we hadn't smuggled anything from Austria. The last questions was, "Why did you try to hide from us?" We had to invent an answer fast. We said we were not hiding, just discussing which way the station was. To this the policemen courteously showed us the direction and parted.

Whether they really believed us or it was due to the Christmas spirit, we will never know. In any case, it was a close call, and also close to the Gestapo too. But we met with success.

The bomb-damaged railroad station was in total darkness. Electricity had not been restored yet. We could hardly find our way in the crowded waiting room. I camped down under a table in the naive hope that, should the gendarmes or the Arrow-Cross come to inspect our identification papers, I would be less visible. "Aunt" Ilonka and Rado felt safe enough to stay among the crowd. (Ilonka was rather disappointed that I joined them. I sensed her dislike of me.)

Now everything seemed simple. Once we were on the train, we just had to sit tight and wait, until our arrival at Budapest. What we didn't know was that the Red Army completely encircled Budapest that night.

Morning came very slowly. By daybreak I left my temporary shelter. Then came the agonizing wait for the ticket window to open to buy tickets to Budapest. It was then that we found out there was no more train schedule and an announcement would be made when the

train would leave. But no train would go to Budapest, only to Komarom (about 50 miles west of Budapest). We were finally aware that there was new trouble awaiting us, but there was no way to turn back.

Finally we could board the train. As a safety precaution, we took seats further away from each other.

A border station, even in normal times, is subject to all kinds of control, but more so when a war was being lost. Sopron was such a station. Gendarmes, Germans, Arrow-Cross men were swarming and constantly passing through our car. There was no sign when the train would leave. As a kind of defense (or rather delusion), I pretended to be asleep and with half-closed eyes I watched the unpleasant traffic.

Miraculously, nobody asked for identification. Finally, about 9 a.m., the train pulled out. It was a painfully slow train, making all local stops. At each stop I was alert to watch for any sign of danger. But nothing happened. With every passing stop we got closer to Budapest, and further away from Sopron.

It was about 3 p.m. when we arrived at Komarom. The train wasn't going any further. No reason was given, but by now we could guess.

We stayed for a while longer at the busy station, hoping that maybe after all there would be another train to Budapest. We went to a restaurant since we hadn't eaten all day. We noticed that the gendarmes started blocking the doors to inspect documents. I was a few seconds faster and got out through a side door and went straight to the toilet. Rado and Ilonka stayed. When the inspection was over, Rado came to find me, calling out my new name, "Mr. Voros!" So I realized that the danger had passed and I could come out.

By now it became clear that no train would leave for Budapest because the Russians already had cut off the city. Our plans were dashed. We needed to devise a new plan. The quickly advancing Russians were not far from Komarom. Perhaps this would be our best and only chance to be liberated from the Nazis.

It seemed to us that the fall of Komarom was imminent, only a matter of a day or two. I saw with satisfaction that the hated and ever so cocky gendarmes were already busily cutting off their rank and insignia from their uniforms. We almost congratulated each other for having arrived just in time to be liberated. There was general confusion all over.

"Aunt" Ilonka was more practical. She told us that from now on we would be her nephews and we had to find a place to stay overnight, which we did. The next morning we went to the market where she bought three or four killed ducks with Rado's money, of course. She succeeded in finding a room but they couldn't provide us with food. So she asked permission to roast the ducks. She got a couple of empty jars to store the meat and the fat--just in case. (Later it came in handy, because of lack of food.)

A few days later it became obvious that the Germans not only stopped the Russians but pushed them back by 15-20 miles, at least. This was bad news for us. Waiting in Komarom would have been futile.

We were debating which bank of the Danube we should continue on. When we heard about the extremely heavy control on the only bridge over the Danube, we stayed on the right bank. (Shortly after we left Komarom, the Russians overran the left bank--today's Czechoslovakia. Too late for us.)

On December 27, 1944 we left Komarom for Budapest, following the snow-covered Vienna-Budapest highway. On the left bank we could see and hear the Russian tanks. The soldiers moved like dots. It didn't occur to us right away that the Russians too could see us in the sunny, crisp weather. I noticed little punctured holes in the fresh snow around us but paid no attention to them. Only when we were further down the highway did we see a disabled Hungarian army truck. Then we realized that we were the targets for the Russians with their telescopic rifles across the Danube.

The Hungarian soldiers near the truck were waving for us to lie down and crawl in the snow to their shelter: a highway culvert. Just

before the entrance to the culvert I saw a hand sticking out of the snow. It was part of a dead body and I had to crawl over it. It was an eerie feeling but I had no choice. The Russians were now starting to shell the truck and us. The culvert got full of dust and smoke. When the shelling stopped, we left our shelter and our Hungarian "comrades."

We kept walking towards Budapest, unaware that the front line was one or two miles away. Only wounded German soldiers walked or were carried from the opposite direction. They were too busy to ask questions of us but judging from their expressions, we must have been a strange sight for them. We thought it safer to walk in a field dotted with trees and bushes than on the highway.

Suddenly the invincible Germans were in full and disorderly retreat. The Fuehrer should have seen this. His once proud army fleeing like rats from those "inferior" Russians. But for us it was an exhilarating moment. We forgot about the possibility of being shot either by the Germans or Russians I still can visualize the bewildered German officer's face as he tore down various military signs nailed to trees. As if this would stop or at least slow down the Russians' advance.

We began to realize that we couldn't continue this way any longer. It appeared like the Russians would arrive any moment. Since it was getting dark, we thought it best to spend the night in a nearby village and next morning awaken "free." Naszaly was that village.

"Aunt" Ilonka proved very skillful in finding a place to stay. It was a rather simple peasant house with several rooms. Ilonka slept inside while Rado and I stayed in the stable. We anticipated that we would be here for one night only.

The best rooms, as usual, were occupied by German soldiers which made us feel very uneasy. Personally, I would have preferred to stay with the animals in the stable during the day instead of with the Germans. But that would have been impossible.

After the first two days when the Russians still hadn't come, we had to extend our stay longer. After washing and shaving in the stable,

we went into the house. Walking on the street was too risky because of the local Nazis and gendarmes. Therefore we chose the lesser of the two evils: we stayed indoors with the Germans all day long. Rado and I sat in the main room waiting for the Russians, who never came. Occasionally we did some work for our host. But mostly we stayed indoors whispering to each other or listening to the Germans.

At the beginning our host sold us a little food which we supplemented with Ilonka's ducks.

Everyday was very long and boring. The Germans were coming and going, always replacing those who left. For a change, we saw the remnants of two SS-Panzer divisions (the Theodor Eycke and the Totenkopf, the infamous skull and cross bones). One of the Germans tried to strike a deal with our host, exchanging sugar for tobacco leaves. But the language barrier prevented this from happening. So he turned to us and asked if we could assist by speaking German. Reluctantly we agreed.

At that point they became very friendly. We realized that this new relationship could be beneficial for us. Without their knowing, the Germans were protecting us from the local Nazis. Whenever a Nazi opened the door, for whatever reason, he quickly withdrew when he saw us in the company of other Germans. There was a price to pay however. They started to ask us questions. "How come you are not in the army?" We told them that the draft age in Hungary was 21 and we were younger. (Of course, this was true only in peacetime.) It seemed as if they accepted our excuse.

"That's no excuse!" retorted the German. "You could always join us!" (That's all we needed. To put on that hated SS uniform.) They kept pestering us and it became more difficult to evade them. We explained that our parents and relatives were in Budapest and we wished to ascertain whether they were all right. After that, we would be more than happy to join the SS. Grudgingly they accepted this probably because Hungary was a friendly country and they couldn't force us to join against our will.

The idea that we could be Jews never entered their minds. They always recognized a Jew when he was forced to wear the Star of David or a yellow armband. I think most of these Germans never met a Jew in life.

December 31, 1944. New Year evening was coming. The Germans wanted to celebrate the New Year with a party and it style. They needed wine for this. The wine cellars were between the front lines. (We were that close to the front.) We acted as interpreters for them. They wanted to be sure that they weren't stealing our host's wine. Apparently they had a rather unique code of honor.

They got the wine and Rado and I were cordially invited to the party. There was lots of singing and drinking. The wine was supplied in buckets and seemed to be inexhaustible. Neither Rado nor I were big drinkers, but Ivan and I had agreed beforehand to only drink the minimum quantity of wine to make certain that we would remain sober. This was to prevent our blurting out something, even in Hungarian, which might give us away. This precaution was justified because there was one Hungarian renegade among the Germans. He was the only unfriendly one in the whole bunch. He never said a word to us. Perhaps he was suspicious of us, or embarrassed for being a renegade. We never knew. But we both agreed that he is the one to be watched.

Before 1 a.m. the commanding officer announced that this was going to be the last drink before starting the attack to "liberate" Budapest. And so it was. When they finished, they stood up, ready to get into their tanks. We were impressed by this high degree of discipline.

As they left, a few of the men made a last minute effort to have us join them. When we explained that we were untrained, their answer was that we could still help to feed the tank's gun with shells. Wishing them luck, we politely and firmly turned down this "once in a lifetime" offer.

We never saw them again. Most of them perished in their tanks. The "last drink" literally became the last one. We shed no tears for them. But afterwards, at each New Year evening, I remember the New Year I had in the company of the SS in 1944, in the village of Naszaly.

New Germans came. Mostly from the Wehrmacht or ground personnel from the now invisible Luftwaffe. By now we had gotten used to them and knew how to handle them. We tried to utilize our new relationship with the Germans to understand what motivated them. We had plenty of conversations with them.

A couple of days later our host felt that he no longer could afford to sell us food, claiming that he didn't have enough for himself and his family. It was quite unpleasant to sit there hungry and gloomy.

One of the airmen, Helmut, became somewhat interested and sympathetic towards us. He noticed that we had eaten only once that day. We said we weren't hungry. "Isn't it because the peasant refused to give you more food, claiming he didn't have enough?" We answered in the affirmative. "Don't believe him!" replied Helmut. "Every morning he goes down to the cellar, fills his belly, then comes back and tells you he has no food. From now on, I'm going to share my food with you."

And so he did. With all fairness, I must say that the German Army's food was very good indeed. Not as good as the Gestapo's, but good enough to maintain the army's fighting spirit--and our spirit to resist. He also gave us much needed soap and razor blades.

Helmut was about our age, blond, blue-eyed and handsome. Hitler would have considered him an ideal, pure, Nordic Aryan. A real German. And we thought, a good German too. Rado and I played with the curious idea that if Helmut learned our true identity, would he still be so good to us? Of course this remained only a playful idea, but in no time our curiosity was answered.

When we sat at the table together with the Germans, sooner or later the subject of Jews arose, like an obsession. Helmut was the leader and the most vicious, fanatical Nazi and anti-Semite in the group. Of course, these were words only. I doubt he did anything else besides talk because he would have bragged about it. I really don't think he ever, knowingly, met a Jew. But he, like the other Germans, was thoroughly brainwashed and accepted anything his superiors told him

without question. No matter how educated they were individually, together they acted like robots. This was the German way.

Once when discussing the Jews, Helmut suddenly asked me, "Are there any Jews left in Budapest?" Inadvertently I blurted out, "Only children and old ones." (Rado gave me a kick under the table for this. I deserved it.) "Well," continued Helmut, "when the SS retakes Budapest, no Jewish children or elders will be left alive." Then he started to praise the "virtues and heroism" of the SS. He admired them. Of course, we agreed enthusiastically with him. Now I went on the offensive which was unnecessarily risky. "The SS, known for being brave and superior in every respect, don't they look down on the Wehrmacht and the other branches of the army?" First they didn't (or didn't want to) understand my bold question. Then they all assured me that this was not so. (I still thought that was untrue, but I didn't want to go any deeper into this subject. I already had gone far enough.)

Now Rado had a rather easy question. "Among the British and American prisoners of war, how do you recognize which one was Jewish?" Helmut had an answer to that. "It's very easy! They (the Jews) all have a hooked nose, curly hair, walk in a funny way, and they talk with their hands (gesticulate)." We agreed with him that it is easy indeed.

I'm not sure it was Helmut, or some other German who brought up another popular subject. The war. It was the first time that we heard from a German's mouth that the war is lost. We were "properly" shocked and wanted to know why. The answer was rather simple. "Because of the Jews!" Then he explained, "You see every Jew carries a small bag of diamonds and gems to bribe the German generals to lose the war." It was that simple. We were astonished by this logic but we couldn't ask him to show us just one wandering Jew with his gems in German-occupied Europe. And so even in defeat they had to find a scapegoat: the Jew.

It was now mid-January. The Russians were thrown back about 15-20 miles and our host refused to give us any more food or shelter. We had to go, no matter how risky and dangerous it was. Before

parting, Helmut, who really liked us, insisted if we ever get to Frankfurt am Main (Germany), we should visit him. There was only one person with the name Helmut Schramm. We promised him we would do so. (Twenty years later, in 1965, I tried to make good on my promise.)

Again we had to take the same highway to get closer to Budapest--and the Russians. Finding a place to stay and getting some food was always a major problem. Of course, we never revealed our identity. We stuck to our old story that while we were looking for a place for our parents and relatives we got cut off from Budapest. Having "Aunt" Ilonka with us made this somewhat more believable.)

By now I got used to my new name and identity. The I.D. cards with photos had to be destroyed because I just couldn't risk another inspection wit them, especially during daylight. I also made changes in ink on the remaining two documents. The original 1908 year of birth became 1923 because this required the least alteration and was close to my actual age.

We only stayed for one week at Nyergesujfalu at the home of an ethnic German widow and her married (and very pretty) daughter. Her husband was away at the war and again they claimed they did not have enough food. Before we left we noticed a pair of new boots under the bed. Good boots could make the difference between life and death. But even if we agreed that after the war we would compensate her, we just couldn't bring ourselves to steal them.

Our next stop was Tokod, less than 28 miles from Budapest. Most of the men worked either in the glass factory or the coal mines and were exempted from the draft. Dorog, its sister mining village, was less than 5 miles away and partly under Russian control since Christmas.

This time a very poor ethnic Slovak family was our host. They needed the money, no matter how little its value was. Their thinly veiled sympathy was with the Russians but we had long ago made a resolution to not trust anyone, so we didn't say anything. (This village too was occupied by the Russians during Christmas and our hosts felt some kinship towards them.)

Almost every night the Russians were shelling the village, but this didn't bother us. While everybody went into the cellar, we stayed in the house. During the day, as the old lady prepared a very simple meal, she would talk about the Russians cautiously but fondly. Her son even showed us a large denomination of occupation money which they had received from a Russian officer. It was worthless now, but someday it might have some value.

Another time the subject of Jews came up. They felt sorry for the way the Jews were treated. (None of us knew at that time the real tragedy that befell the Jews.)

She mentioned the Dukesz family of Mor, with which she was close. After they were deported their most valuable items went to the Germans, followed by the Hungarian Nazis by rank. What was left over was distributed between the people. With an embarrassed smile, she showed us a worn, old coffee grinder. This was her share. It was unclear whether she considered this a practical souvenir or a reward for betraying a fellow man. We didn't react.

A few days later my "rejuvenated" papers were tested. An Arrow-Cross man came with a German soldier and demanded we show them our I.D. cards. They questioned us, verifying our answers against the data on the cards. That's how our host heard that I was born in 1923.

There was no radio or newspaper. The village crier made the official announcements. A few days after I made the changes it was announced that every male born in 1923 or before must report to the army. That night when everybody was in the cellar, I performed some cosmetic surgery with ink and made a number 25 from the 23. Now I was born in 1925 but the paper got thinner from the scratching.

Not seeing any preparations, our host asked me when I was going to report to the army.

I said, "Why should I go?"

His reply was, "Weren't you born in 1923? That's what I heard."

"No," I answered, "you probably misunderstood because I was born in 1925." So this was settled, at least for a while. But I felt uneasy about this for a couple of days.

Once more "Aunt" Ilonka tried to persuade Rado to elope to a nearby town (Esztergom), thus leaving me alone. Ivan refused this, perhaps out of loyalty to me, or perhaps he trusted my head more than Ilonka's. So they stayed. (Two months later I repaid Ivan for his loyalty.)

One night while everybody was in the cellar there was a tremendous pounding on the door. We immediately thought it was the Russians. When we opened the door we were disappointed. Four German SS-men staggered in. Without saying a word they went into a room, laid down and immediately fell asleep. That's how exhausted they were. We could have killed them with their own weapons but we were not butchers. (Besides that, half of the German Army would have been after us.)

When they woke up the next day they told us they were exhausted after being on the front line for four days and nights. After washing and shaving they looked quite human again. While attaching their egg-shaped hand grenades to their belts, one grenade accidentally fell onto the floor. For a long minute we all looked at it, mesmerized. Nothing happened because the safety pin was not pulled out. Then they all laughed and went away. It was another kind of close call.

On February 1, 1945 the village crier announced that every male over 14 years of age must register for military service at the local Arrow-Cross Party's headquarters. Rado and I reached the end of the rope. There were no more excuses left for us. By now Rado was almost 19 and I was almost 21. Obviously we couldn't claim that we were below age 14. Our only consolation was that the Nazis must be desperate to draft young boys to fight for them.

Reluctantly, we showed up to register. For the first time we gave them the raised-arm Nazi salute, and added to this a not too convincing

"Eljen Szalasi!", the Hungarian equivalent of "Heil Hitler." We were told to report there the next day at 8 a.m. We would then go to Komarom on foot, escorted by gendarmes. The trip would take four to five days because we had to make a detour in the mountains. The highway traffic along the Danube was controlled by the Russian guns from the opposite bank of the Danube. We needed to take a sufficient food supply. We left subdued, thinking that our luck was running out.

Our hostess was very resourceful regarding food provisions. There were lots of dead horses lying all over, killed in previous battles. They were frozen and strewn all over the main street. She made a kind of meatloaf from these animals, added a few slices of bread, some potatoes, and we were all set. Not too appetizing, but that was all we had. ("Aunt" Ilonka continued to stay there. I never saw her again, but Rado did after the war and settled his debt to her.)

At the meeting point were about 150-200 young men. Escorted by gendarmes, we took the winding road up the Vertes Mountains. We passed a few villages and more disabled tanks, trucks and dead horses. Reminders of previous battles.

It was still daylight when we arrived at the village named Hereg. The highest ranking gendarme told us to find a place for an overnight stay. The next morning they would go from house to house to pick us up. But next morning nothing happened. We waited and waited. At 10 a.m. we started to inquire. We were told that the group left a long time ago. Apparently the gendarmes forgot about us.

It took only a few minutes to discuss this new situation. Fate or not, we were not going to run after them, after all, we were not so enthusiastic to begin with. We agreed to turn around and go back the same way we came. But instead of going back to the same village, we would try another one also close to the front line. Just in case, if questioned, we already had a believable answer prepared. "We are heading to Esztergom (Eastward) to join the army." Soon our answer was tested when we bumped into a group of Hungarian soldiers and gendarmes. It worked.

When we were hungry enough, we could force down one of our "sandwiches" and wash it down by eating a handful of pure mountain snow.

Somewhere on the road we had a clear view of the Danube, about half of a mile wide. It looked frozen and tempting because on the other bank (in Czechoslovakia) the Russians were already there. This gave us the idea to just walk across the frozen river at night and we would be free. We were desperate and willing to try anything just to get out of this hopeless situation.

Just before sunset, we reached the completely deserted village of Sutto, next to the Danube. It was an ethnic German village and the inhabitants fled the shellings and the Russians who crossed the frozen river on skis. It was a ghost village. We had never seen anything like it. On one door was a handmade sign in German:

"Bitte nicht plundern, Zivil commt zuruck!" (Please do not plunder, the civilian will return!) Obviously the sign was addressed to the German soldiers and probably with good reason.

The door was open and we entered the house. It was a strange feeling. First we searched for food but found only a jar of pickles. We also had no luck in finding some heating material. It never even occurred to us to break furniture. To get warm, we went to bed, dressed.

Late evening, when it was completely dark, we cautiously left the house. We watched and listened carefully but there was no sign of anything moving and no shooting either. Slowly we approached the river. Not a soul was around. At the river edge we had a surprise. From a distance the icy surface of the river seemed smooth. But at the riverbank huge ice plates were haphazardly thrown on top of the others. They were at least 15-20 feet high. Later we learned that this was caused by the wreckage of the bridge at Parkany, blocking the flow of ice.

Making as little noise as possible, we had to climb up on one plate and then slide down to reach the next one. Then there was another

unpleasant surprise: deep water accumulated between the ice plates due to rain or melted snow. We were soaking wet when we finally reached the smooth icy surface.

We had other worries too. Not only with each step did we make a loud, cracking noise, but due to the white ice we were quite visible should the Germans be patrolling the riverbank.

Apparently nobody noticed us. So we kept going, looking and listening in each direction. We were almost halfway across the Danube when I heard some murmur like a flowing rivulet. At the same time I noticed a dark streak in the middle of the ice field. I stopped Ivan to tell him about my observation. It became painfully clear that the middle of the Danube was not frozen. We had to turn back before the ice broke underneath us.

Carefully testing and measuring every step now, we got back to the village the same way as we left it. Miraculously we didn't even catch cold. We were too drained, physically and emotionally, to think of our next move. We just wanted to get warm and dry, to sleep and forget about this latest defeat of ours.

The next day, when we analyzed our situation and reviewed our failed attempts, we realized how lucky we had been until now. Even if we encountered one problem, somehow we managed to get out of it and then we fell into another one, worse than the trouble we had been in before. No matter how lucky we had been so far, we just could not shake the Germans off our backs. They seemingly had an invisible grip on us. Eventually our luck had to run out and this would be the end. Knowing this, we just tried to stretch our luck as far as we could.

While debating our next move, someone knocked on the window (apparently steamed up from our presence). It was a Hungarian soldier. Unhappily we let him in. After brief small talk, he came to the point. He guessed that we were draft dodgers or deserters (and not Jews). Somehow he appeared to be trustworthy and reluctantly we agreed with him. He came up with a surprising, but unbelievable, solution. He suggested that we could get across the front line through the coal mines

in the vicinity of Dorog. According to him, one entrance to the mine was at Ebszony, in the German-controlled area. The exit from the mine is in Dorog, on the Russian side of the front. If we could get to the mine, we could get over to the Russians in no time. It was that simple. Then, wishing us good luck, he left.

We pondered his suggestion, incredible as it was. We decided we had nothing to lose by trying it.

The main highway along the Danube was deserted, thanks to the Russian guns on the Czech side of the river. Ebszony was near Tokod, where we were originally drafted into the army. Therefore, we bypassed Tokod to avoid recognition by the local Arrow-Cross in the village.

It was dark when we arrived at Ebszony, a tiny obscure mining village. We had the usual problem of finding a place to stay. We knocked at the door of one house where we saw light and heard loud music. There were German soldiers inside. By now we knew how to handle them so we weren't concerned. As it turned out, they were not German but Ukrainian renegades in German uniforms. But the German masterss did not fully trust them because they were unarmed. Their job was to transport supplies for the German Army.

They were friendly and gave us food and something to drink. One of them spoke German and asked us who we thought was going to win the war. Without hesitating we told him that naturally Germany will win it. "Too bad," was his answer.

"Why?" we asked trying to sound rather indignant, "after all, aren't you wearing their uniform?"

To this he explained that should the Germans win the war, everybody would become a slave.

Now we went on the offensive. "Are you trying to tell us that Russia should win the war?"

"No," he said, "because then we would be executed as traitors."

"Then who should win?" we asked impatiently.

"America," replied the Ukrainian with conviction in his voice.

"Splendid idea," we said, also with conviction. With this we parted amicably and spent the night in an old woman's house where hundreds of bedbugs almost ate us alive. We could not have risked staying another night in the company of bedbugs.

The next day a retired miner took us in attracted by the money Rado offered him. Very cautiously we inquired about the mine and if it had an exit on the Russian side of the front line. We learned it really existed but the Germans also discovered it and blocked the entrance to the mine. Again we were too late.

We resigned ourselves to wait patiently. The best room, as usual, was occupied by German soldiers. We didn't bother to get friendly with them. I guess we were tired of fraternizing, so we just ignored them. With the exception of occasionally helping our host, we stayed indoors most of the time.

The miner lived with his wife, daughter and grandchild. Their son-in-law was away. A few days later he showed up unexpectedly. His name was Mike Gyori, an Arrow-Cross gendarme, whose job was to round up others to fight his war.

His first comment upon seeing us was, "Because of these deserters, we are losing the war!" (It never occurred to him that we might be Jews because Jews were deported to Auschwitz long ago.) Naturally this statement upset us, but our host assured us that we shouldn't worry. Gyori came to take his family to safety near the Austrian border and was expected to leave in a few days. But he stayed at least seven or eight days. It seemed like an eternity to us. Cautiously I tried to tame him and it appeared that I was making some progress with each passing day.

For example, he was originally from the town of Csongrad, in Central Hungary. In 1938 I spent the summer there. I still remembered

the names of a couple of gentile boys I played with. He too knew them. Now we had some common memories to share. By profession, he was a lathe machine operator and so was I. This too strengthened our common bond. He no longer spoke about deserters. We thought we had succeeded in taming him. We were wrong!

Before Gyori left for good, we heard that the Germans needed fifty young men from the village each night to dig trenches between the two front lines. This area was considered a no-man's land. We befriended a teenager from this group who was willing to arrange for us to join this workforce. It was a suicidal idea because the Russians had the habit of shooting first and asking questions later. We couldn't speak Russian, but we felt we had nothing to lose.

Finally Gyori decided to leave, and that night we were to begin digging. We happily waved them goodbye. We felt relieved, but it didn't last long. Not even one hour passed after Gyori's departure when two gendarmes came straight for us. We didn't doubt for a moment that it was Gyori who reported us. But unintentionally, he did us a favor, without ever knowing it.

One of the Germans in the house had witnessed our arrest. He mumbled that he was about to report us to his superiors because he suspected that we were deserters. (Again being Jewish never entered his mind.) The German "justice" would have been swift and merciless. They considered deserters enemies and usually shot them on the spot.

Outside of the house it occurred to one of the gendarmes to inspect our papers. When I showed mine (without the photo, of course) he quickly noticed the thin spot at the date of birth. Enraged, he demanded an explanation for the forgery. He raised his hand to slap me on the face, in true gendarme fashion. I had to come up with an answer fast if I wanted to save my teeth. I told him that since I was two years older than my friend Rado, I made the alteration so we could stay together in the event of our being drafted into the army. This sounded plausible to the gendarme so he lowered his hand.

The next question was, "Why didn't we join the army when there was a general draft?"

To this we could only think of one answer, "We didn't know." This too sounded innocent and acceptable. We sensed a change in the gendarme's attitude. While escorting us towards Dorog, Rado started to chat with them. They told him that the next day they were taking another group of young men to Komarom to fill the ranks of the Hungarian SS (Arrow-Cross) legion.

In our uncertain situation, even the Hungarian SS looked attractive. So Rado asked the gendarme if we too could join them. The gendarme thought for a moment and replied, "Perhaps you could, but your friend who forged an official document cannot." So I became a tainted man. This was still better than being caught as a Jew.

The gendarmes took us to the Arrow-Cross headquarters in the German controlled part of Dorog. There our troubles started in earnest.

One of the local Nazis from neighboring Tokod recognized us and remembered that we had already been drafted just two weeks ago. Therefore our claim that we didn't know about the draft was discovered to be a lie. Then he added menacingly, "The village leader (Fuehrer) will be back tonight and he will take care of you!" (We knew by now that an Arrow-Cross leader was master of life and death.)

This didn't sound too promising since we had already heard stories of ordinary deserters having been tortured by the Arrow-Cross. It would be much, much worse if they found out that we were Jews. That was the worst of all possible scenarios.

They placed us in the cellar with an armed Arrow-Cross man posted as guard. There we spent an uneasy night with little sleep. Fortunately the village leader failed to come back that night and the gendarmes didn't want to wait any longer. So they added us to the group to be escorted to Komarom. With a sigh of relief, we started our journey. This time we took the Budapest-Vienna main highway. Apparently the previous Russian shelling stopped.

We were resigned and made no attempt to escape. There was no place for us to go. We had exhausted every possibility.

The trip was uneventful. But the gendarmes didn't forget about us. Three days later, when we arrived at Komarom, we were separated from the group and taken across the Danube to a century-old fortress used as a military prison. The dark and damp dungeon in the basement was filled beyond capacity. Everyone greeted us with one question, "How far are the Russians?" This was foremost on everybody's mind.

Sleeping on a cot was out of the question. There wasn't any. Because of the groundwater wooden planks were placed in the corridors to provide dry access. I slept on one of those planks.

The next day was the court martial. It was an assembly-line procedure. It was a joke. We were lined up in front of the judge with about fifteen other deserters. We were the only civilians. The judge was both prosecutor and defense attorney. His only question was, "Why didn't you join the army?"

Everybody was searching for excuses that would save them. We stuck to our story. As innocently as we could we told the presiding judge that we did not know there was a general draft. The judge seemed satisfied with our answer. He then asked, "Then you want to join the army?"

Almost enthusiastically and unanimously we replied, "Yes, sir!"

"Move away from the others, so they won't contaminate you. You are decent men!"

He gave us a choice. "Do you want to join the Hungarian SS, or the Hunyadi SS Panzers, or the army?"

"Modestly," we chose the army. It was the most appealing option. Thus we began our new career, in the Hungarian army.

February 18, 1945. Together with several hundred draftees we were taken to the village of Szony on the right bank of the Danube River. A large number of soldiers greeted us on our arrival. They were looking for friends and acquaintances from their hometowns and villages. We wanted just the opposite. We did not want to meet anyone who could recognize and denounce us.

One soldier, a total stranger, spotted me and asked, "Aren't you Jewish?" Showing fear would have been the worst thing to do. I pretended I was annoyed by this question and said rather arrogantly, "Are you crazy?"

"We can find out," was his reply. We both knew what he meant.

"Be my guest!" I said, hoping to sound nonchalant. He left me alone. But I was nervous for a while that one day I might run into him again.

I had other things to worry about. Someone told me that part of the company we would be serving with was composed of young men from Budapest. I shuddered at the thought that any of my former classmates from the gymnasium would be among them. I was sure he would be betray me. Fortunately they turned out to all be strangers to me.

The same day we received our uniforms. They were disgusting: blood-stained, holes in them, and terribly ill-fitting. Undoubtedly they were taken from dead or wounded soldiers. Since we were untrained, we were also issued shovels to dig trenches. The entire company had four rifles.

Once we were in uniform, we had to take the loyalty oath to "our" nation's leader, Szalasi. He was the Hungarian Fuehrer, founder of the Arrow-Cross party. I still remember one sentence of that oath which was an obligation to report any enemy of the National Socialist State. (I wondered, as a joke, should I report myself?) We also received our military identification booklet, authenticated by two fingerprints from our index fingers in lieu of a photograph. At last I was legitimatized as Peter

Voros, soldier in the Hungarian Army. I no longer had to show the much altered identification documents. This was a positive result for me. Now I could concentrate on surviving the war.

The company was divided into five units, each commanded by a sergeant. Ours was a young fellow who didn't care much about his men. Other sergeants were older professionals. They demanded cleanliness which included daily public baths usually with everyone using the same water. We fortunately escaped that.

We were housed in a vacated grade school in Szony. Instead of cots we had to sleep on lice infested straw. After the first night we too got our share of lice. We itched and scratched constantly. (I thought of the "good" old days in the forced labor service where we "dirty" Jews maintained absolute cleanliness and lice were unknown.

We had some rifle exercises. The shortened paramilitary training we received in the gymnasium came in handy. Unintentionally we excelled in these exercises and were cited daily as good examples. Rado and I decided that we should slow down. We just wanted to be average soldiers with nothing to call attention to ourselves.

Most of the time we dug trenches, anti-tank ditches, in anticipation of the Russian attack. The mortar shells exploding around us didn't bother us much. Once the Russian tanks came very close but were beaten back by the Germans. We thought the Russians were just testing the Germans' strength.

After the daily work we returned to our quarters. We had to give the Nazi salute to any German comrade we met. It was either ignored or returned casually with a contemptuous smile. No wonder! We looked like a ragtag army. No comparison to the smartly dressed, spic and span, German soldiers. I hated to recognize this fact, but it was true.

Most of my fellow soldiers were from neighboring villages and they had plenty of food from their parents. They didn't need the meager army provisions. They wanted to do some business with us, less fortunate city

folks. In exchange for their surplus army bread they took anything useful or valuable.

It was another deja vu for us. It brought back memories from three months ago, on the Austrian border, when Hungarian soldiers were offering the starved Jews a slice of bread for a price. This time they were doing it to their own people. But the experience felt similar to us.

We had Sundays off. I was looking forward to the rest after such hard work. It wasn't meant to be. Roman Catholicism was the official state religion so Sunday mass was compulsory. We tried to get excused, but it was impossible. Also we didn't needlessly want to call attention to ourselves.

So we went to the local church and followed what the others did. When everybody sang, I hummed. When everybody kneeled, I did the same to. Meanwhile I was watching a louse crawling on the back of a fellow soldier. (The person behind me was probably watching the same on my back.)

Rado was assigned to the company's office as a clerk. This assignment had definite advantages for both of us. Now we would have advance warning about coming events so we could prepare. Some events were trivial, others more serious.

Among the trivial things I recall was that the company got four barrels of rum. The sergeants got the bright idea to add a few drops of rum to our morning coffee and save the bulk for themselves. Nobody could check how much rum was really distributed but the sergeants were drunk for several days. It was a wonderful idea indeed.

We learned that in a few days there would be a health check of our genitals. That news was quite upsetting.

In the church it was announced in the local church that Easter was coming and it would soon be time for confession. This would be an individual experience and there was no one to ask what we needed to

do during confession. Rado and I discussed this many times, but couldn't come up with a solution.

Finally we agreed that we had no choice but to tell the priest that we were Jews and be at his mercy. We tried to anticipate his reaction. Perhaps he would be bound by the secrecy of confession. Perhaps he might consider us "heretics" and decide that the law of secrecy wouldn't apply to us. He might think it his duty to report us to the authorities. That would be the end for us. Our only consolation would be that we did everything in our power and stretched our luck. We lived four months beyond November 1944 when we were taken from Budapest.

When the health check came, Rado and I decided not to stand next to each other. This was the only thing we could do. It passed, and we were greatly relieved. The next hurdle, the confession, loomed over us as an unsolvable problem.

Until now we had meager, often tainted, worm infested food. But we were not starving. We knew the time was fast approaching when they could no longer be able to feed us. One day it was announced that according to army regulations every man was entitled to six pengo's worth of daily food supply. We were to get this money and buy our own food. But money had no longer any value. This new rule literally was tantamount to officially sanction begging. Nobody would sell us food for money that was worthless.

Begging was a completely new experience for me. I had to convince myself that not I, but Peter Voros, the Hungarian soldier, was begging for food.

In most cases the peasants politely, but firmly, turned us down. They claimed that they didn't have enough food for themselves. I vividly recall one case. The room was filled with Germans staring at us with mild interest. They knew perfectly well the purpose of our visit. The peasant had just told us that he had no food when his wife opened the door. She put a basketful of boiled eggs on the table in front of the German soldiers. There was an embarrassed silence. Even the Germans must have felt the awkwardness of the situation. The

Hungarian soldiers were starving while the German masters were still getting whatever was available. After all, wasn't this what the Germans' "New Order" was all about?

March 13, 1945, a day I will never forget. Our unit was ordered to dig an anti-tank ditch cutting through the Budapest-Vienna highway and right next to the oil refinery of Szony. The flood of the Danube had just receded, leaving a thick layer of mud. On the other bank of the river were the Russians. Each time a Russian plane took off, the air raid of the refinery was sounded. There was no way to hold back the workers, who in the past experienced several heavy bombings by the British and the Americans.

But we were under military rule and our commanding officer dismissed the alarms caused by the Russian planes as nothing serious. He ordered us to continue digging. So far he had been right. Everyday there were frequent alarms and so far nothing had happened.

On that day I was at the bottom of the ditch when I heard a familiar noise, the humming sound of the American "Flying Fortresses" coming from across the Danube. I recognized this lovely, purring noise from the time when I was in the Forced Labor Service near the Austrian border. It was the rendezvous spot for the bombers.

I did not wait for permission. I started to climb up the ditch, but it was too late. I couldn't run because with each step I needed to extricate my foot from the mud. I could see the planes and the bombs above me, shining. Fortunately the first wave hit the tank farm at the rear of the refinery. There were six more waves and in between them I tried to move a little further away from the refinery. The mud made this painfully difficult. I found some shelter in a crater created by the previous bombings and watched the spectacular effect of the bombs--with satisfaction. At the same tirne I was thinking about the irony. I escaped the German and Hungarian Nazis and now the American bombs would finish me. What hurt me most was that I wouldn't be around to see and enjoy the victory over the Nazis.

In the crater next to me was a fellow soldier, Zsiga Komaromy of Neszmely. He was holding a piece of wooden plank at the top of his head for protection and crying uncontrollably. I always carried a pocket mirror with me and looked at myself to see how I looked in the face of mortal danger. My face and my ears were unusually red. That was all I could see.

Luckily most of the bombs landed on target and the entire refinery was engulfed in flames among the sound of secondary explosions. There were no German planes in the air, nor any anti-aircraft fire on the ground. The entire operation was unopposed and lasted perhaps twenty minutes.

After this life returned more or less to normal. We had to do some cleaning at the former refinery but we could see immediate results of the fuel shortage caused by the destruction of the refinery. To save fuel, German tanks and trucks were now towed by another one.

Afterwards the Russian air raids continued daily, but it was nothing like that bombing. Now, without waiting for permission to leave, everyone ran as far as they could from the refinery. I never saw such panic and hysteria when the alarm sounded. People grabbed any means of transportation by boarding it or just hanging from it. It was real international chaos. Besides us there were Serbs, Italians, Romanians, and who knew what else. Everybody was busy trying to save his skin and nobody gave a damn for each other.

By now Rado and I felt quite safe as soldiers and could concentrate on the lesser danger facing us: the war itself. At least we were equal with the others because bullets and bombs did not discriminate.

There was only one remaining problem for us, as Jews: the confession. This seemed to us more ominous than war.

A few more events remain in my memory from those days. I believe the British dropped leaflets showing the mechanism of the hitherto secret V-2 rockets. They just wanted to prove to us that that

secret weapon was no longer a secret. Then the Russians dropped leaflets offering "safe conduct" to any Hungarian soldier who showed this paper to a Russian. We were afraid to keep them for obvious reasons. But I memorized, for life, three Russian sentences on the leaflet so I would know what to shout to the Russians before they might shoot me. Translated also in Hungarian were the following sentences:

1. Russian don't shoot!
2. I don't want to fight for the Germans.
3. Down with the Germans!

We never needed to test these slogans.

Finally spring came and freedom was in the air.

Around March 25, 1945 the Russian Army finally started the long awaited offensive. I don't know where or how they broke through the German line, but they were advancing rapidly. So rapidly that that night we had to evacuate Szony. Through the bridge at Komarom, in forced march, we went across the Danube and then Westward.

There was great confusion everywhere. I think by now everybody could sense that this was the beginning of the end. Everything was crumbling around us.

So thankfully our confession problem got solved too. Instead, new problems arose. Where will we end up? In Germany or in a Russian prisoner of war camp? Neither seemed desirable.

Most of the fellow soldiers were from neighboring villages. Rado and I told some of them that it would be foolish to continue the march when the end of the war was imminent. We also told them that their parents could easily hide them until the Russians arrived. What we said hit a receptive chord. Apparently many of them had the same idea but were afraid to say so.

The only thing we asked for was, should they decide to desert the unit, we would like to join them and hide with them. They all agreed to this but they wanted to wait for one more day.

The next day was very much the same as the day before except for more confusion. We kept marching Westward in the direction of Germany. By nightfall we all banded together and slipped away from our unit. All of us were in uniform and kept the shovels. In case the military police asked questions, we could say that we got separated from our company, but we had not deserted it. (Rado and I never parted from our civilian clothes even though we had to carry them.)

There were about ten to twelve soldiers in this group. They were very anxious to reach their homes and so walked very fast. Rado and I kept up with them.

Suddenly Ivan slowed down. He started to talk incoherently and refused to go on. I don't know what came over him but he became delirious. For obvious reasons, nobody was willing to wait or rest, nor even to slow down. I was fully aware of the risk of separating from the still official looking group. But never for a moment did I think of leaving Rado alone. I would rather stay with him in the middle of the night and in the middle of nowhere.

All I could do was ask the boys for directions to try to catch up with them later. Impatiently they told me a few details. We had to pass through a village named Keszegfalva. Then we would need to find Janos Varga, a farmer, who had a rowboat and would ferry us across the Vag River where Imely, their village, was situated. All these I had to memorize quickly and then they melted away in the darkness. We never saw them again.

I remained with Rado in unfriendly, unfamiliar terrain. He obviously had a fever therefore there was no use trying to force him to walk. I thought the best thing we could do would be to rest. I found a depression in the ground which offered some protection against the cold wind. We huddled together and, with the aid of our blankets, tried to keep warm.

A miracle! The next morning Rado was better. He didn't remember a thing from the night before. I felt I had repaid my debt to him for his loyalty in not deserting me despite "aunt" Ilonka's urgings.

Of course I was the one who had some idea which way we should go, following the footsteps of our comrades as they told me. It was noon and a sunny day when we reached the outskirts of Keszegfalva. The main street was the highway which passed through the village. The village itself looked like an armed camp. There was no way to bypass the village because it was flooded from the Vag River.

We already met a few suspicious glances from the Arrow-Cross and gendarmes, but the shovels on our shoulders apparently convinced them that we were engaged in some kind of official business. Nevertheless, it was a rather long village and we walked with unease. Unexpected help came in the form of an air raid. Everybody disappeared from sight but we just kept marching--happy and relieved. Three Russian planes appeared overhead and circled above us. Each plane turned sideways and sprayed us with machine gun bullets. I think we were their only moving target. Bullets hit the houses just a few feet away from us. We had no time to search for cover because we wanted to leave the village as quickly as we could. Fortunately, we passed through the village without encountering any of its inhabitants.

Outside the village the highway served as a dam with flood water on both sides. It was still early afternoon and we agreed it would be better to arrive at the farmer's house just before dusk. He wouldn't have been able to ferry us across the river during daylight. It would have been best to be inconspicuous, but there was no way to hide. The terrain was flat with no bushes. We decided it was best to lay flat at the base of the trapeze-shaped dam and rest. Our stomachs were empty but we were too excited to feel hungry. Feeling quite comfortable, we stretched out and enjoyed the sunshine. Undetected, we could hear the traffic and voices from the highway above us.

Suddenly a middle-aged civilian appeared at the base and headed straight towards us. He rudely asked us who we were and what we were doing. He appeared to be unarmed. We knew how to react instinctively

to this. I tried to match his rudeness, "Can't you see we are soldiers? And who the hell are you? Are you guarding the dam?"

"Never mind who I am! Show your identification!"

"We are military personnel, as you can see and we don't have to identify ourselves to civilians," we replied defiantly. Not wanting to overdo this cockiness, we grudgingly showed him our military identification.

"Where are you going and where is your unit?"

We told him that in the commotion we became separated from our unit and expected to rejoin it at Imely where we had been ordered to work on the military airfield. Some of our fellow deserters had been from this village so I knew the story was believable. What we couldn't anticipate was that the village fell to the Russians the next day.

However, the man (most likely an Arrow-Cross bigwig) accepted our explanation. He must have had some sort of authority because two policemen on bicycles noticed us. He told them that everything was in order so the policemen left.

This happened so quickly that Rado and I didn't have time to plan a strategy beforehand. But at this stage of the war there was no way we would have allowed ourselves to be taken back either to the gendarmes or to the Arrow-Cross in the village we had just passed.

After this episode we resumed our walk in search of the farmer with his row boat. After several inquiries, we found him at his isolated farm. The information our fellow deserters had given me was correct and so was my memory.

We asked Mr. Varga about these deserters and he explained that they arrived the day before and he took them across the river because he believed it his duty to save them. We told him we belonged to the same group. He said it was too late, the Germans confiscated his boat that morning. He quickly added that he had another boat hidden. He

promised to ferry us across the Vag River during some quiet night. Meanwhile we should change in to civilian clothes and occupy ourselves in his garden.

We shed our uniforms with the exception of our caps which we intended to keep as souvenirs. Our shovels came in handy to work in the garden. A few Germans, staying in the house, witnessed this transformation with suspicion. We ignored them. Shortly after our arrival, they cleared out of the house and we did not see them again. They must have sensed that the end was near. These were the last German soldiers we saw. The long-awaited liberation was about to become a reality.

On March 31, 1945 we heard news of the arrival of the first Russians in neighboring villages. Liberation came with no ceremony. We earned it the hard way.

Together with our host and his wife we sat down to a festive Easter dinner. We thanked them for sheltering us during this crucial time. Without divulging our identity, I gave their young son my most valuable possession, the Swiss watch. He accepted it only on my insistence and couldn't understand my motive. (I was also influenced by rumors that the Russians were ardent "watch collectors.")

We were impatient to leave as soon as possible. We had planned it for so long. So immediately after the meal, we left. We didn't want to risk the Germans returning.

Now there were different problems to face along with different dangers in a totally different world. How would we get home? What would we find there? It was like traveling uncharted territory. We had already heard rumors about atrocities caused by the Russian troops, and their fondness for watches, drinking and taking prisoners of war indiscriminately. We thought these were propaganda exaggerations of the Germans. We were wrong.

We decided to go back to Komarom the same way we had come just a few days ago. Then we would somehow get across the Danube

because the right bank was familiar territory to us. We agreed we would not trust anyone regarding our Jewish identity.

We encountered the first Russian soldier as we approached the nearest village on foot. We looked at him as if he were a man from the moon. He shouted something that sounded like, "Urra, urra!"

We thought he said, "Hurrah!" Then he moved closer and to our amazement he started to search our pockets. Naively I thought he was looking for hidden weapons. The first thing he found was our army caps. Disgustedly he threw them away. (Good thing he wasn't interested in taking us as prisoners of war.) After that, with a triumphant yell, he pulled out Rado's watch, which had stopped a long time ago. Now we understood that "Urra, urra" wasn't a greeting, but the Hungarian word for wristwatch, "ora." Satisfied of having relieved Rado of his watch, the Russian let us go. (Now I was doubly happy that I had given my watch away.)

That same evening we reached Komarom without any additional interruption. We found a rundown hotel where we could spent the night. It had only one bed. We were told the bridge spanning the Danube was demolished, thanks to the German Army. We had to find a new way to cross.

Someone told us that Russians had boats and would ferry civilians across the Danube. We found the boat with an old Russian soldier guarding it. He seemed quite harmless and friendly but we had no way of communicating with him. We just pointed to the boat and to the other bank of the Danube. In return he pointed to blue eyed and blond Ivan and asked, "Germansky?", and to me, the less incriminating "Bolgarsky"?

To this we replied, rather modestly, "No! no! Magyarsky!"

Other civilians joined us. Loudspeaking Russians also arrived. They let us onto the boat and handed us the unusually long oars belonging to seafaring vessels. None of us were able to handle them. Hungary was a landlocked country.

Impatiently and rather roughly, the Russians pushed us away shouting, "Bourgeois!" They took the oars and ferried us across the river.

Now we were again in familiar territory which we had gotten to know much too well during our previous adventures. But we were still about fifty miles west of Budapest and had a long way to go. We had some food with us thanks to our last host so we started the long trip back on the Budapest-Vienna highway. The highway was practically deserted and nobody came from the opposite direction (Budapest).

Later we met a group of happy gypsies who had also been destined for extermination. They were liberated in a camp nearby. We passed a battlefield littered with German weapons, tanks, trucks, etc. I was tempted to bring home a German rifle as a souvenir but it was too heavy to carry.

Finally we saw someone coming from the opposite direction. He was a shabbily dressed young, blond fellow. We were eager to get a first-hand report about Budapest since we had heard so many conflicting rumors. When we asked him if he was coming from Budapest, he acted as if he hadn't heard us. We repeated the question. He blurted out the words in German, "Bitte, Bitte" (please, please). We realized then that he was a German soldier in civilian clothes heading to Austria. At this moment a group of Cossacks appeared on horseback also from the opposite direction.

I couldn't speak Russian, but I could have pointed at him and said, "Germansky soldat," but I didn't. I was in a joyous, forgiving mood. I had not yet fully known the magnitude of the horrible crimes committed by the German people and their army. I thought to myself, "To hell with him, let him go. His mother is probably waiting for him, just as mine is." So I did nothing and let him pass. Later I regretted this magnanimity of mine.

We passed Szony and saw the anti-tank ditch we had been digging just three weeks ago. (Even today it is visible at the Eastern corner of the refinery.)

More Russian soldiers came. They paid no attention to us which we didn't mind at all. I don't recall where we spent the night. The following day, as we were nearing a railroad junction, I believe near Tata, a Russian officer stopped us. He said something like, "Malinki Robot," (little work) indicating that we should unload a couple of boxcars filled with sacks of sugar of German origin. We didn't mind doing some work for the Russians now, after all this was the least we could do. Hours passed and no end was in sight. We had the feeling we might end up in a Russian prison camp. Nobody was guarding us so we just slipped away, without even looking back.

The next day we reached the area that had been occupied by the Russian Army ever since Christmas. Another Hungarian ex-soldier joined us. He too had spent many months away from his family. He invited us to spend the night in his home in Bicske, which was not too far. By now, no matter how friendly he was, we wouldn't tell him or any other Hungarian, nor the Russians, that we were Jews. We thought it would be the safer this way.

We witnessed a happy family reunion and they shared their modest supper with us. Since this region had already been occupied for several months, a sort of normalcy had returned there. Our host's wife told us that every morning a freight train left for Budapest and we could board this train. She warned us to be careful, however, because Russian soldiers surrounded every train at the Budapest terminal and took men into captivity. This new problem--the possibility of a Russian prisoner of war camp--really worried us. This would have been just too much after what we had been through. We were still about 25 miles away from Budapest.

The next morning, on April 3, 1945, we boarded the train. After a long wait, the train started to move. There were many people on the train but we spoke to no one. Everybody seemed to be afraid of strangers, which suited us just fine.

Nervously we watched the stations at each stop. Finally we reached the outskirts of Buda. Just before the train pulled into the last stop, the Kelenfold Terminal, we both jumped off the train. Half an hour

later while we were passing the terminal on foot, we saw from a distance the male passengers of our train being escorted by Russian soldiers. It was a close call.

It was a different world now then when we had originally left the city. Signs of bombings, shellings, and street fighting was clearly visible but sporadic, at least at the outskirts of Budapest. Before we left Germans, armed Arrow-Cross men, Hungarian soldiers and military gendarmes were everywhere. They were gone now and we certainly didn't miss them.

It seemed strange to us that every man was trying to look older by growing a beard. Many were bandaged or looked disabled. Most of them wore some sort of non-military uniform or a cap perhaps to appear as if they had official business to attend to. At first we thought these disguises were real, but soon we realized that this was just a camouflage against being taken as prisoners of war.

We were now somewhere in Buda, on the right bank of the Danube. But our homes were in Pest, across the river. We had heard before that the German Army had destroyed all the bridges spanning the Danube in a futile effort to stop the Russian advance. Now the immediate problem was how to cross the Danube. Somebody told us that two temporary bridges had been built atop the wreckage and opened to traffic just a few days ago. We had also been warned that these bridges were guarded and the identity of the passersby inspected.

We destroyed our original identification papers a long time ago to avoid detection by the Nazis. Now we only had our Hungarian military identification booklet, as well as the phony or forged ones. None of these would be too helpful in case of a thorough inspection. No matter what, we had to overcome this last obstacle.

Now, for the first time since that fateful day of November 27, 1944, Rado and I had to part. We agreed that we would take a different bridge, closer to each of our homes. If we made it, we would then contact the other's family.

I chose the Horthy Bridge. My home used to be just a few blocks away from the exit. When I reached the Danube, the familiar panorama of the city looked shockingly strange. Then I realized that the once graceful bridges, all six of them, were lying in ruin, lifelessly. Without them the river looked eerily empty.

The destruction of the inner city of Pest with its famous row of hotels, was another shock. The German Army, true to its scorched earth policy, shelled it from the hills of Buda, where they had made their last stand. The Germans were already surrounded by Russians. This senseless destruction of our once beautiful city, the "Queen of the Danube," could not have had any military justification. It was a fitting memorial to the Nazi German-Hungarian "friendship" of yesterday.

Now I had to concentrate on the most pressing problem: how to get through the last hurdle: the bridge. I knew I couldn't afford to fail because I might end up in a prisoner of war camp somewhere in Russia. And this would have been just too much to endure. I was looking longingly at the other bank of the Danube. It appeared undamaged.

Cautiously, I approached the wooden ramp that led to the temporary bridge. From a safe distance I decided to study the situation before I made any move, just as I had a year ago when the Germans and the Hungarian police set up checkpoints at the city limits to catch "fleeing" Jews, at the beginning of the German occupation.

I saw a Russian soldier watching and inspecting the traffic on the bridge. I doubted if he really could read the Hungarian documents. I tried to determine if there were a pattern or a system to his inspection. I studied him for half an hour until I discovered that the Russian's attention was only focused on the pedestrians on the sidewalk.

People on the roadway with wheelbarrows, carts or any sort of makeshift vehicles could go on without being stopped. I double checked my discovery before swinging into action. I saw a bearded man pulling a cart laden with pieces of furniture. One of his arms was in a sling and he was outfitted with a street cleaner's black uniform. No doubt it was a disguise. Before reaching the ramp, I asked him if I could help over

the bumpy, uneven bridge. He looked at me suspiciously. "All right!" he said. "I don't know you but I hired you for 20 pengos"

That's all I needed. He was pulling, I was pushing the cart. No one stopped us. Once we were on the left bank, in Pest, I thanked him and I ran. We lived only three blocks away. I think I set a new world record in running that distance. A few minutes later I was in my mother's arms. It was three weeks before my 21st birthday. Finally I was home!

I still cannot describe my emotions and mood at that moment. I will cherish it as long as I live. In the past year I experienced more than most people do in a lifetime. These experiences are etched into my mind. But they never disturbed me because I felt victorious. I felt I had won my private war against the German Army and their Hungarian cohorts by outwitting them--and of course, by sheer luck.

Now I live in the United States of America and I know real freedom. I treasure it. When I look back at the past, I think of it with satisfaction. Not only that I did it, but, as the popular song says, "I did it my way!"

EPILOGUE

On December 24, 1944, the Russian troops succeeded in encircling Budapest and thus a number of German soldiers and Arrow-Cross men got trapped. It was a disaster for the city, as well as for the German troops, fighting almost till the very end.

But the Arrow-Cross was something else. Literally they went wild and got into a killing frenzy. They tried to massacre as many Jews and military deserters they could. It was a complete reign of terror.

The houses protected by foreign governments never were safe havens in reality for the Jewish inhabitants. But now they evacuated those houses in the "International Ghetto" at will. Depending on the whim of the Arrow-Cross men, the Jews were taken to the banks of the Danube for execution, or squeezed into the "Old Ghetto," with the intention of blasting it later. They just didn't have the time to do this.

All these events happened before Pest fell to the Russians on January 18, 1945, followed by Buda three weeks later.

My mother told me that on January 9th the tenants of the neighboring Swedish protected house were taken to the bank of the Danube river and subsequently massacred. At the same time the inhabitants of the Portuguese protected house were forced into the "Old Ghetto." And it was there where my mother, grandmother and another aunt were liberated.

My father survived the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and was liberated by the U.S. Army in April, 1945. He weighed less than 80 pounds. As a result of this he contracted edema and he never fully recovered from his ordeal.

Uncle Alex escaped from the Portuguese house on January 9th, when the Nazis seized the building, and found refuge in our cellar. After the war he immigrated to the United States. His greatest treasure was his American citizenship.

My other aunt wasn't as fortunate. While she was waiting in line for the protective "passport" at the front of the Swiss Consulate, she was captured by the Arrow-Cross. First she, along with many others, was herded to the camp at Hidegseg to dig trenches. (When I was there for a short period of time, I had the feeling that she was there too. But there was nothing I could do for her.) How much she must have suffered there during the bitter cold winter due to lack of adequate clothing and food, I can't even imagine.

She, too, ended up in Bergen-Belsen. She died of malnutrition and typhoid after liberation. She was 43 years old.

Her employer for over 20 years, Lever Brothers, the soap and detergent manufacturer, established a scholarship for her only son until he graduated from the Technical University. The scholarship was in her memory and in recognition of her merits. It was an extraordinary tribute. After all, five years had passed since the company was forced to terminate her employment due to the country's anti-Jewish restrictions.

My mother's sister and her very patriotic husband and their two sons managed to survive without ever applying for foreign protective "passports." When everything crumbled around them, they all went underground. Literally. One day they just showed up in mother's cellar.

Finally, as for myself, I graduated from the Technical University as a civil engineer. Since 1957, after the Hungarian Revolution, I have lived in the United States of America. A totally different and immensely better world that what I left. This is my greatest accomplishment.

A BRIEF FOLLOW-UP

The transition from war to peace was not as easy as I thought it would be. I was restless for a while. The memories didn't haunt me, because I personally never experienced the horrible crimes committed by the German Nazis or the Arrow-Cross. But it took some time to not to be on the lookout for any sign of danger (which had been my daily routine that year). I had to get used to no longer being an outcast in my country of birth.

From 1945 until 1948 there was democracy for the first time in history and I enjoyed it immensely. All the previous restrictions were removed and we could breathe freely. The doors of the universities were wide open. After three years of hiatus I could resume my studies.

For a while the wartime memories kept coming back in different forms and on different occasions. Shortly after I returned, I met Rado's parents, but only once. During my visit I just could not get out of my head that these people broke their promise to my mother and betrayed us.

Curiously Ivan and I didn't become friends. Somehow we just didn't click. During our adventures we argued a lot, but we needed each other and we had a common goal. That was all. I can't explain this even to myself. We were just two different individuals, bound together by fate. Rado enrolled at the Medical University and visited us a few times. In 1948 I saw him for the last time before the Iron Curtain came down. He and his parents disappeared without a trace. Perhaps they emigrated to the West.

During his visits to us we naturally recalled the "good" old days when we had been together. When ever Joseph Nagy's name came us, we wondered about his motives for reporting us the gendarmes, and we wanted justice.

I wrote to the notary of his village asking for information about Nagy's whereabouts. According to the reply, he was still living there, apparently with a clear conscience. He even received a piece of the

estate he had managed before. This was just too much. We started the legal procedure. Nagy was accused of committing a war crime. It was the case of People v. Nagy.

The trial was held in Sopron, in 1946. Besides us, surprisingly there were about twelve more witnesses. Every witness had to wait outside the courtroom to be called to the witness stand.

I was the first one. After a brief interrogation, the judge asked me a key question, "How do you know that the defendant reported you to the gendarmes?"

To this I said, the gendarme who arrested us told me after I had asked him. Obviously I was in no position to ask the gendarme to put it in writing.

The next question was, "When and where did you tell Rado what the gendarme told you?"

I said it was on the following day, December 4, 1944, in the jail in Sopron, after they put Rado in the same cell with me.

Now Rado was called in and he gave the same answers to the same questions.

About half the remaining witnesses were for the defense, stating almost unanimously that Nagy was with them in the barn until about 10 a.m. on that day. Not enough time to make a roundtrip to the gendarmerie on foot. (But enough if Nagy and the gendarme rode back together on the gendarme's motorcycle, which probably was the case.) Even the judge remarked that there must have been a clock in the barn, since everyone could remember the exact time Nagy left the barn on December 3, 1944 with such accuracy.

The prosecution's witnesses stated that Nagy bragged that we had been spies and subsequently we hanged.

Nagy denied everything.

Finally the verdict came: eight months jail term. The mitigating fact was that we both survived (which was certainly not to Nagy's credit.)

Nagy appealed to the higher court in Gyor. There the judge was openly hostile to us. He not only rejected our testimony as no proof, but he admonished us for accusing an innocent man. He threw the case out, and Nagy was acquitted. So much for justice.

In the fall of 1945 I enrolled at the Technical University of Budapest. One day while going home after school, I accidentally met one of my former pro-Nazi schoolmates. We greeted each other coldly He had just returned from a Russian POW camp. He asked me where I was during the war. I told him I was in the army, with false papers. Then I added, "During this time I was thinking of you!"

His eyes lit up. He asked me in disbelief, "Really?"

I said, "Really." I explained to him that one of the company's units was composed of youths from Budapest and I thought then that if he had been amount them, surely he would have denounced me.

To this he said, "I would never have done this to a former schoolmate of mine."

"Maybe so," I replied dryly, "but I think it was better that we didn't meet." This was my only revenge.

Then I met another former schoolmate of mine. He was a deeply religious Catholic who had wanted to enter the priesthood. He had not been openly pro-Nazi but he was no friend of Jews either.

Now he was a priest. After the usual greetings and a brief account of the war years, I asked him, just for courtesy, "Where is your parish?"

"In the village of Ebszony," he said. I told him I had been there for about ten days in February 1945 with false papers. Then I asked him if he knew a man by the name of Mike Gyori. He told me he did. Gyori was one of his most devout parishioners. I told him that he had been an

Arrow-Cross gendarme and most likely he had reported us as deserters to the local gendarmerie. I told him to ask Gyori the next time he sees him why he denounced the two deserters who had been staying in his father-in-law's house? He will be astonished that you discovered his secret and he will think that you communicated with Heaven and he will tell this to everyone in the village. But I also warned him not to tell Gyori that we were Jews because Gyori had not been aware of this. Should he have known that we were Jews, I wouldn't be alive now.

"Do yourself a favor, and do as I told you!" was my parting advice, and Gyori will not only admire you but will spread it within the community. But my schoolmate blew it.

The next time I met him and asked him what happened he said that when he asked Gyori why he "denounced those two Jewish forced labor servicemen to the gendarmes" Gyori replied that he didn't denounce any Jews. And he wasn't lying, because he denounced us as deserters.

Those "Portuguese" Jews who survived Fertorakos ended up in the Mauthausen concentration camp and were liberated by the U.S. Army. The Americans put them on a truck to take them to a hospital. Among them were the three Kornhauser brothers. The truck passed a group of captured SS-men escorted by American soldiers. The war was over for prisoners of war, so the Americans didn't bother to take their weapons. But one fanatical SS-man, upon realizing that the truck carried Jews, shot at them, killing one of the Kornhausers. It was alleged that after this incident all SS prisoners were shot on the spot. (I don't remember the name of the person who was witness to this.)

Even the two coats he carried couldn't save Dr. Rust against the maltreatment and hardship he suffered at camp Fertorakos. (The two coats caught the eyes of the Nazi while escorting us.) Together with the exhumed bodies of other victims of Fertorakos, Dr. Rust is buried in a mass grave in the Jewish cemetery of Budapest.

It is a strange feeling to read the familiar names on the tombstones realizing that I could have been among them if I had resigned myself to remain in the Fertorakos camp.

Nearby is another mass grave of the exhumed victims of Lebeny. This was the group of slave steelworkers of the Kühne Agricultural Machine Factory, where I started my "career" in the forced labor service in early June, 1944. (Later, when I had the opportunity, I volunteered to work on a farm.)

In that mass grave my two friends, Joe Urbach and Robert Pongracz, are buried. I failed to persuade them to join me on the farm. When I paused at their tombstones and read their names I recalled vividly how undecided they were whether to follow me or not. They ended up choosing the factory and thus, without knowing the future, sealed their fate. (In February 1945 a group of Arrow-Cross men came to the factory and took the younger Jewish men with them. Whatever the Arrow-Cross originally planned, no one knows. But after three days of marching they killed all these Jewish boys in the vicinity of Lebeny.) I still can recall these boys as they were at twenty years of age because they have never grown old.

The detachment of Jewish laborers who worked for the Gestapo fared better. I met a fellow from this group at the Technical University. He told me that in March 1945 they were moved to Austria, together with the Gestapo's plundered goods of course. Despite their yearlong close and somewhat cozy relationship, the Germans were debating what to do with these Jews. Some of the Gestapo wanted to have them all killed. Others were just too busy saving their own skins than to worry about the Jews. They all had civilian clothes and forged papers. When the Americans closed in, the Gestapo just melted away, without harming the Jews.

In 1946 Rado met a fellow named Masura at the Medical University who had been with us in the army. He had just returned from a Russian prisoner of war camp. We were spared this experience too!

And so I saw what could have happened to me if I had stayed in one of those groups.

In 1965 I was touring Europe and I visited Frankfurt/Main in Germany. I remembered my good German "friend" Helmut Schramm. As far as I knew, he hadn't committed any crimes. He only talked about Jews, and talking is not a crime. All I wanted to recall with him were the "good" old days and see his face when at the end I would tell him, "By the way, your "friend" was a Jew!"

I looked up his name in the phone book and found him listed as a real estate agent. He was right. There was only one Helmut Schramm in the book. Unfortunately his wife answered the phone. When I told her in German that her husband and I had been good friends in Hungary, she panicked. She said frantically that this must be a mistake, her husband had been in Poland, not Hungary, during the war. Emphatically she begged, "Please don't come!" She probably suspected that this was a trick against her husband. And so, however regretfully, I gave up the idea of meeting Herr Schramm. It would have been an interesting get-together.

In 1947 the New Hungarian Army made a gesture to the former Forced Labor servicemen. We were given credit for the time we had spent in the service. Since I was still of draft age, I applied for the credit. In the event I was to be drafted, I wouldn't have had to start at the bottom. I got one year credit for the time I spent in the Forced Labor Service, but no credit for my "service" in the Nazi Army when I had false papers. I found this rather amusing. I would have received the rank of "Lieutenant of the Reserve" on the condition that I complete the required course. I never did.

In September 1945, I enrolled at the Technical University of Budapest. Like everybody else who had been in the Nazi-held part of Hungary or who had fled to Austria or Germany, I had to appear for a hearing before the University's denazification committee. The hearing was a public one. I had nothing to hide. It was just a formal procedure. But I had to appear. I tried to keep my account of time with the Nazis to

the absolute minimum and, without going into unnecessary details, I passed the test easily.

After my testimony was over a fellow student approached me. He said, "I listened to your testimony and I wondered how it was possible you managed to go through all these things when your racial characteristics are so obvious?"

For a moment I was taken aback. After thinking it over for a few seconds, I had the explanation. It was really very simple. "During my adventures I discovered that man's cruelty was exceeded only by man's stupidity. And this was my luck!" I think this was the most fitting summation I could give him or anyone else.

And finally, a footnote: I never applied for restitution from Germany. The reasons were:

first, I was in too many places and finding witnesses would have been difficult, if not impossible;

second, and more importantly, I did not want to get paid money for something for which one cannot be paid for. And I did not want the Germans to go debt-free in such an easy way.

USHMM LIBRARY
01 0001 0128 7794